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Prologue: Naden Delal

If you looked at the map of this world, there was the one diamond-shaped continent, Landia, and several outlying islands of varying sizes.

In the center of that continent, called Landia's Navel, there were the three-thousand-meter class mountains that made up the Star Dragon Mountain Range.

This was where the dragons lived, gathering around the living godbeast, Mother Dragon, who was the subject of worship. It could even be called a nation.

The nations of mankind understood the Star Dragon Mountain Range to be the nation of the dragons. There was no clearly demarcated border, but no country wanted to infringe upon their territory so badly that they were willing to fight the immensely powerful dragons over it. And so, mankind and the dragons naturally stayed apart from one another.

Even though times had been chaotic since the Demon Lord's Domain had appeared on the continent, the Star Dragon Mountain Range was a natural fortress, isolated from the effects of that.

In the high plateau in the center of the Star Dragon Mountain Range was Dracul, the dragons' paradise.

Perhaps due to some act of Mother Dragon, the plateau enjoyed an eternal spring despite being at an elevation of over five thousand meters. It was a fertile and verdant land with an abundant supply of clean water.

In Dracul, the dragons lived a unique lifestyle.

Despite their large bodies, massive wings, and powerful horns and fangs, dragons could speak the human language. They could also take on beautiful humanoid forms. They formed riding contracts with the knights of their ally, the Nothung Dragon Knight Kingdom, under which they would become the knights' favored mounts, swearing an oath to fight together on the battlefield. At the same time, they were to become life partners, giving birth to the

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knights' children.

Members of the race of dragons were sexually ambiguous, and unable to produce children between themselves. In other words, in exchange for fighting alongside the knights of Nothung, they had the knights guarantee they would have prosperous offspring.

Each child would be born either as a dragon, a dragonewt, or the race of the knight.

If it was a dragon, it would come in the form of an egg, and it would be taken from the parents to be kept by Mother Dragon in the Star Dragon Mountain Range. This was partly to keep the parentage of a dragon from being considered important, but it was also unclear how long a dragon egg might take to hatch. Because it could sometimes take hundreds of years, it couldn't be left with the parents.

In any case, these partner contracts were formed between the new knights and the dragons at the Contract Ceremony held at the end of spring each year.

That time... had almost come.

In the middle of the 3rd month, 1,547th year, Continental Calendar

It was a forest on the east side of the plateau Dracul in the Star Dragon Mountain Range.

With its everlasting spring, the forests of the Star Dragon Mountain Range were always decorated with fresh growth. The leaves were a deep green, and when you looked up at them from inside the forest, they sparkled brilliantly in the sunlight shining through the treetops. However, further down, at ground level, there was little sunlight, and it was gloomy.

In those gloomy woods, there was a small cave.

A white dragon landed in front of that cave. Her white scales glistened in the light. Her silver mane blew in the wind. On her head was an exquisite pair of goat-like antlers. The silver dragon folded her large wings, craning her neck to look into the cave.

"Naden, you're in there, aren't you?" the white dragon called into the cave.

Though she was speaking, it wasn't aloud. Dragons could converse by willing it, without using their voices. There was no response to the white dragon's call, but a little noise did escape from inside the cave. Its occupant was probably pretending not to be there.

The white dragon groaned. "Stop ignoring me! I know you're in there!"

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she called, sounding exasperated, and then took a deep breath. When the air she inhaled returned to her mouth, orange flames leaked from the corners of her lips. If she opened her mouth now, she would unleash her dragon's breath, the flamethrower attack known to lay waste to entire countries. "If you're too uncooperative, you're going to get burned, you know!"

"H-Hold on, Pai! You'll burn the books!" came the panicked voice of a young girl from inside the cave.

When she heard that voice, Pai swallowed her flames, then let out an exasperated sigh. "Honestly... Stop holing yourself away in there and get out here."

"But I was watching *Music Port*..."

"*Music Port*? Wuzzat?"

"It's a music program from the Gran Chaos Empire."

"The Gran Chaos Empire?!" the white dragon exclaimed.

The Gran Chaos Empire was a strong nation with a firmly entrenched power base in the west of the continent. Though they had been on the defensive since the appearance of the Demon Lord's Domain, they were still effectively the most powerful of all the nations of mankind.

During the time in which the Gran Chaos Empire had been trying to establish its hegemony over the continent, it had invaded the Star Dragon Mountain Range. This had been the Empire at its peak, with an army numbering in the hundreds of thousands, facing around a thousand dragons. As one might have expected, given that it was said that a single dragon could destroy a small nation, the Imperial forces were overwhelmed, leaving them no choice but to retreat. Ever since that battle, it had been hard to call relations with the Empire cordial.

"The Empire is hostile to us, you realize!" Pai cried. "What are you thinking?!"

"It's not like we're at war right now, are we?" Naden retorted. "The current Empress, Maria, is beautiful and seems peaceful. I think we should take the chance to try and make friends with them."

"You say that, but... wouldn't Lady Tiamat be angry if she heard you?" Pai protested.

Tiamat was the leader of the Star Dragon Mountain Range, the one that mankind knew and worshiped as Mother Dragon. She was like a mother to all the dragons who lived in this area, and when her name came up, the girl in the cave sounded a little panicked.

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“Ahaha... That’s kind of scary... You’re scaring me, so keep quiet about this, okay?”

“Oh, for goodness sake...” Pai sighed. Her entire body emitting a bright light, she instantaneously transformed into a beautiful young girl with pale skin and long, flowing white hair, wearing a white one-piece dress. She looked unmistakably human, but the goat-like horns sprouting from beneath her hair and the white tail extending from her rump clearly showed she was the white dragon from before.

Pai walked into the cave. It wasn’t as dank as it looked. If anything, the air was fresh. This was normal for caves in the Star Dragon Mountain Range.

Pai progressed through the cave, coming to an area where it suddenly opened up.

Before her eyes spread a room that, completely unlike the rock walls of the cave up until this point, was very girly. There was a cute dresser and bed. The bookshelves were lined with books from the nations of mankind (mostly romance novels). Pai addressed the person watching the simple Jewel Voice Broadcast receiver in the middle of that room.

“Oh, Naden, there you go, watching that simple receiver again...”

“Yeah, and?” the girl called Naden responded. She had black hair and was wearing a black one-piece. “I can watch what I want.”

There were deer-like antlers growing out of her voluminous black hair on either side of her head, and a black tail sprouting from her rear end. At a glance, she looked to be around fifteen years old. She was short, and looked underdeveloped. However, when looked at in profile, her young face had a hint of beauty, and if she dressed right, she would probably look very cute.

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Knowing that, Pai sighed all the more at her disappointing friend. “Sigh... I don’t know which is worse: this, or when you had your head full of dreams, reading too many romance novels.”

With the past suddenly brought up, Naden coughed in surprise. “I-I was just reading books! It’s not like I was *only* reading romance novels, okay?”

“You were obsessed with them. Saying things like, ‘I’d put love before duty!’”

“I read ordinary adventure stories, too!”

“Dragons don’t usually read human books to begin with...”

The reason for that was simple. Since the only country that had diplomatic relations with the Star Dragon Mountain Range was the Nothung Dragon Knight Kingdom, not many products from the nations of mankind made it here. If one wanted to acquire products from the nations of mankind, one had to go to those nations directly, leaving the Star Dragon Mountain Range. Most dragons were not interested enough in the world outside, or in products from the nations of mankind, to do so. Those like Naden, who used every opportunity she could find to go outside and come back with foreign products, were a rarity.

“Wait, where did you get that receiver anyway?” Pai asked, startled.

“Hmm? I found it at a flea market in the empire. It was broken, basically a piece of junk, but when I gave it a little zap, it started showing things. Hee hee! It was a great find.”

As she said that, Naden’s black, lizard-like tail slithered toward the simple receiver. When it got there, there was a clicking sound, and the image on the receiver vanished.

Naden could store electricity in her body. By releasing that stored electricity, though Naden didn’t understand the principle behind how it worked herself, she was able to turn the simple receiver on and off. There were definitely other creatures that could store electricity in their bodies, but Naden was probably the only one who could control it so skillfully.

Watching her do that, Pai shrugged in exasperation. “You’re skilled in the strangest of ways, you know that, Naden?”

“Hey, I was lucky enough to have an electrified body. I’m not going to let that go to waste.”

“I know, but is that really something a dragon should be doing...?”

In Dracul with its everlasting spring, the dragons who had yet to form a contract lived their lives as they pleased. They did things like fly around in

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dragon form, play in the water, and go hunting.

There were times when the dragon priestesses who served under Tiamat would teach them about dragon traditions, the outside world, and reading, writing, and arithmetic; but other than that, they could each use their time to do whatever they liked.

Among all those dragons living in that old-fashioned way, Naden was probably the only one who could use tools from the outside world so skillfully.

Pai asked her with some exasperation, “Are you really a dragon?”

“...I wish I knew that myself,” Naden said, her gaze returning to the screen.

Pai got a look on her face that said, “Oops, I screwed up.” That subject was probably painful for Naden.

“Um, uh... So, this music program thing? What is it?” Pai asked, trying to change the subject.

“They broadcast cute girls in cute outfits singing and dancing for the people to see,” Naden said. “It’s fun just watching it. Though, from what I hear, the ones who are the real creators and masters of broadcast program production aren’t the people of the Empire, they’re the people of the Elfrieden Kingdom. It’s a shame I don’t get them on this simple receiver.”

“The Elfrieden Kingdom? You mean that country where they summoned a hero, and he became their king?” Pai asked, surprised. When she heard the name “Elfrieden,” the image that came to mind was a very traditional, or, to put it less kindly, old-fashioned kingdom.

Naden waggled a finger at Pai and tut-tutted her. “You can forget everything you think you know about Elfrieden. Oh, wait, they’re the Kingdom of Friedonia now, aren’t they? I don’t have all the details, with my information coming from the Empire, but it sounds like they’ve been growing in power really fast under the new king’s program of reforms.”

Naden picked up the simple receiver with her tail and played with it.

“I think the way he took the Jewel Voice Broadcast, something the royal family had only used to make one-sided announcements of things that were already decided, and used it to create something fun like these broadcast programs shows incredible foresight. Unlike this country, which never changes, the Kingdom of Friedonia is pressing further and further ahead. I’d like to meet this hero king of theirs myself. Maybe I’ll land in Friedonia next time I go out.”

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Pai stomped her feet in indignation. “Good grief! What are you thinking?! It’s almost time for the Contract Ceremony, you know? There’s no way you’ll be allowed to do that at an important time like this, when our futures are going to be decided!”

“That doesn’t... really matter,” Naden said. “I’m sure no knight would ever choose me. I mean, *I can’t fly, and I can’t breathe fire,* after all.”

“...”

Naden’s eyes filled with resignation.

There was nothing Pai could say in response.

Though she, Naden Delal, was a dragon of the Star Dragon Mountain Range, she had no wings with which to fly through the skies, and she could not breathe fire. Her appearance was very different from the other dragons, too.

That was why the other dragons called her a worm (saying she was long, thin, and not much else) behind her back. That was part of the reason why Naden tended to hide away in the cave. Pai was one of Naden’s few friends, but there was nothing she could do for her about this.

“Erm...” Pai said, thinking frantically. “B-But you can shoot lightning, Naden!”

“...What good is that? No knight will choose me as a partner. If they did, they’d be the only knight who couldn’t fly, you know?” Naden averted her eyes.

The dragon knights of Nothung were famed across the continent.

These knights, who rode atop the already tough and powerful dragons, would soar through the skies, tearing through enemy lines and burning everything away with dragon fire. Though they were a small country, the dragon knights had been responsible for making the Nothung Dragon Knight Kingdom capable of fighting on even terms with the Empire, even if it was only on the defensive. There could be no place for the flightless, fireless Naden in their ranks.

“You’ve got it good, Pai,” Naden sighed. “A pretty white dragon like you... I’m sure you’ll have your pick of the litter.”

“...I’m sensing some hostility in those words.”

In the ceremony held to form contracts with the dragon knights, the knight would first choose a dragon to become his mount, and then the dragon would decide whether to accept or not. That meant a dragon who received multiple offers would have her pick of them. Naden was probably thinking

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that Pai was sure to have that.

"Maybe I should just leave the country?" Naden asked, moping. "I could probably pass myself off as a sea serpent."

From what Pai had heard, the race known as the sea serpents and Naden in her human form looked quite similar. As for what made them different, the antlers on Naden's head were bigger, and sea serpents lacked the ability to transform like true dragons, but there were few enough of them that no one would notice unless she said something about it.

Pai groaned in exasperation. "If you take a defeatist attitude, you'll become a defeatist at heart!"

"But..."

"Besides, didn't Lady Tiamat give you a prophecy? It's going to be fine."

The dragons who would attend the Contract Ceremony in any given year were chosen by Tiamat. The will of the individual and how old they were didn't come into it. Those dragons who were chosen would receive an oracle from Mother Dragon at the beginning of that year. Naden had been one of them.

"Eventually, one who knows your value will appear. That is when you will leave the nest."

That was definitely what Tiamat had said to Naden, who had all but given up on her future. Tiamat said it with the gentle eyes of a mother. Naden couldn't imagine that Tiamat had been lying to her. However, at the same time, she couldn't see that prophecy coming true.

"That's... got to be something Tiamat said to console me," Naden said at last. "Even I don't know what my value is. What is a complete stranger supposed to see in me?"

"But, from what I hear, Lady Tiamat has never had a prediction fail to come true."

"Fine, I'll be the very first failure. Hurray for me."

Pai groaned. "You're such a defeatist."

"Pai, if you keep making that groaning noise, you're going to develop black spots like a cow, you know?"

"Moo! Moo! Moo!" Pai exclaimed.

While watching Pai get angry out of the corner of her eye, Naden sighed. *If there really is some value to my existence, and someone could find it for me... how wonderful would that be? If a miracle like that happened, and they take me away from this boring place where it's always spring and nothing*

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exciting ever happens... Well, it's just not possible, is it?

Naden forced that earnest wish of hers deep into the recesses of her heart.

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Chapter 1: What You Get out of Louts and Scissors Depends on How You Use Them

15th day, 3rd month, 1,547th year, Continental Calendar

It was a sprawling prairie in the northwestern part of the Kingdom of Friedonia.

A single wide road ran across that prairie with its excellent view, and on either side of that road were demon-destroying trees from the God-Protected Forest planted at regular intervals. This was one of the national highways that had been laid down as part of the transportation network. If one were to follow this road, they might pass merchant caravans protected by adventurers, or rhinoceros-drawn freight trains.

It was a quiet spring day with clear skies. There was a covered wagon drawn by two horses traveling down said highway. In the covered cart were the wares of a common traveling peddler, but the horses which drew it were quite magnificent beasts.

We were inside that covered wagon. And I was talking to the guy who was *running behind the cart.*

“What do you think, Hal?” I asked. “How’s it feel running down a road you built yourself?”

“I won’t deny it’s gratifying, but... when you’re the one who says that, it pisses me off a bit...” Halbert said grumpily, still running outside the cart.

Currently, there were four of us riding in the covered wagon: Aisha, Kaede, Tomoe, and me.

This was the group traveling to the Star Dragon Mountain Range at the direct invitation of Mother Dragon.

However, we didn’t know the reason for this invitation, and only a few of

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my closest retainers had been notified, so we needed to travel incognito. That was why I was wearing my usual Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago traveler's outfit, consisting of a conical straw hat and a traveler's raincoat; Tomoe was wearing a white mage's hooded robe; and Aisha, Hal, and Kaede were each dressed as adventurers.

Of course, once we arrived in the Star Dragon Mountain Range, we intended to change into our formal uniforms that were loaded in the wagon.

Incidentally, the last member of our party, Carla, had gone ahead to scout out things in the direction we were traveling. It was useful having a dragonewt who could fly at times like this.

Aisha and I were relaxing inside the wagon, while Tomoe was in the driver's seat, having Kaede teach her to control the wagon. Because Tomoe and Kaede were of the similar-looking mystic wolf and mystic fox races, when they sat together in the driver's seat, they really did look like sisters, which put a smile on my face.

Hal had been in the wagon, too, at least initially, but then he'd said, "My body's gonna get all numb like this," and gotten out to start running.

"You were going through hard training as a dratrooper, weren't you?" I asked. "You should take the chance to relax now, at least."

"You're taking it too easy..." Hal gave me a stern and somewhat appalled look.

Uh... Yeah, he might be right.

I was in the covered wagon right now, resting my head in Aisha's lap. My hat was resting on my chest, and I was taking things maybe just a little too easily. I shifted my head backward to ask Aisha, who was patting my head with a goofy look on her face, a question.

"Aisha, are you okay? I'm not too heavy?"

Aisha came back to her senses, and shook her head with all her might. "Not at all! If anything, I should ask if my lap is too hard for you. I have a lot of muscle, after all..."

"Nah, I think it has just the right level of springiness. Look, my finger sinks right in."

"Wah! Hold on, that tickles!"

When I poked her thigh, Aisha writhed a little. It was kind of cute.

"Oh, for the love of... I don't want to be in a wagon with that atmosphere," Hal said with an "I can't take any more of this nonsense" attitude.

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Yeah, if I were in Hal's position, I'd probably feel the same. Tomoe was hogging Kaede, too.

"But, if I hadn't chosen you to accompany me, you two would've been aboard the Hiryuu, training as usual, right?" I asked. "Isn't it nice being able to relax?"

"Well, yeah, but... why are we on this relaxed trip, anyway?" Hal demanded. "They're meeting us at the border, right? Couldn't we have just taken a wyvern there?"

As he said, someone from the Star Dragon Mountain Range was going to be coming to get us at a village on the northwestern border of the Kingdom of Friedonia. Once we got there, a dragon would carry us to the Star Dragon Mountain Range.

From the standpoint of pure efficiency, we could have stayed in the capital until just before it was time to go, and then traveled to the village by wyvern on the day of. But that would've been bad.

"I've finally been given a long vacation," I said. "It'd be a shame to ruin it by rushing things, don't you think?"

"Really? I don't think traveling is something to enjoy..."

This was a difference between the way people in this world looked at things, and the way a modern person would.

In this world, where there were vicious wild creatures, and even monsters that may appear, it wasn't possible to take it easy traveling, even inside your own country.

In the history of Earth, it was only recently that we'd become able to travel so easily. Even in the Edo Period, when public order had been in a reasonable state, when Matsuo Bashou had traveled, he had to accept he might not come back alive.

Thinking of it that way, it made me realize once again just how incredible Poncho was, having traveled around to so many different countries, and having spent a great deal of money, all to pursue his interest in food.

"I like traveling," I said. "Seeing unfamiliar vistas makes my heart dance. My grandma and grandpa liked traveling, too, so they often brought me with them."

"Your grandfather and grandmother did that, sire?" Aisha asked.

"Yeah. Though, with them being an elderly couple, it was a lot of trips to temples, shrines, and castles."

Going to Nara in autumn.

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Red leaves and senbei crackers.

Those had been good times.

Back then, even going to the neighboring prefectures felt like I was going somewhere really far away. I never would've imagined then that, years later, I'd find myself traveling to another world entirely.

While I was basking in those memories, Aisha said, "Now that I think of it, there's something I've been wondering about..." She sounded mystified as she continued. "This wagon, it doesn't shake. Normally, we wouldn't be able to relax like this, you know?"

"Well, it may look like an ordinary covered wagon, but... Genia designed this thing," I said.

"Um, why do you suddenly look so exhausted?" Aisha asked.

"The rhinoceros train primarily carries freight now, but if we want to have it pull passenger cars eventually, the shaking would become an issue," I began.

"Now that you mention it, when we went to the dark elves' forest, it was shaking really badly," Hal interrupted, wincing.

Perhaps he was remembering what it had been like that time. We'd been going there for disaster relief, so every moment counted. That was why we'd gone as fast as we could, without regard to the shaking, and most of the members of the Forbidden Army who had ridden with us had suffered motion sickness as a result.

"That's why I asked Genia to develop a setup that reduces shaking in the car," I explained. "It's just... Genia always manages to exceed my expectations in ways I'd never see coming."

I'd been envisioning something like a coil spring. My studies had been focused on the humanities, not engineering, so I didn't understand the exact way to set it up. But I'd given Genia the Overscientist a rough image of what I was thinking of, and hoped she could develop something close to it. What Genia did develop had been beyond my imagination.

"I never thought she'd come up with shock-absorbing materials first..." I murmured.

"Sh-Shock absor... What now?" Aisha asked.

"I haven't seen one myself, but apparently there's an armadillo on this continent that's so huge you could mistake it for a glyptodon, right?" I said.

"I don't know what a glyptodon is, but you're talking about the giganto armadillo, right?" Aisha asked. "They mostly live in the forests. They have a

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hard armor shell, and even I have trouble breaking it."

"Wait, hold on?! You can break it?!" Hal exclaimed in surprise. "They say it's practically impossible to break their shells with a physical attack, you know?!"

"They do?" Aisha asked. "I hit it around ten times, changing greatswords in between, and I managed to break it."

""..."" Hal and I were both speechless. It looked like Genia wasn't the only one who was off the charts...

"W-Well, setting that aside," I said. "So, we knew that the giganto armadillo defended itself from physical attacks with its hard armor shell, but Genia questioned where the shock from those attacks was going. No matter how much it looked like there was no exterior damage, she thought the impact might be reaching their soft internal organs. When she dissected one to take a look, she discovered the fat deposits on the inside of its armor shell had powerful shock-absorbing qualities."

In other words, the inside of the shell had a fleshy texture; but, to put it in terms a modern person would understand, it had a number of qualities that made it like rubber.

I stomped twice on the floor of the wagon car. "The axles and wheels of this wagon are made with a processed form of that fat found inside their armored shells. That's why this wagon shakes less than other wagons."

"I see... That's Madam Genia for you, all right," Aisha said. "Coming up with something like this so easily."

Aisha seemed genuinely impressed, but my feelings on the matter were a little more complicated.

It might sound a little demanding, but I wished she'd come up with a material that was easier to put into general use. Giganto armadillo fat was precious, and that made this covered wagon expensive in a way that didn't match its appearance. If I tried to make a train that didn't shake using this method, we'd end up overhunting the giganto armadillo.

It needs to be cheaper for the general public to be able to use it... I thought to myself.

However, Genia was a natural-born genius, and once she created something, it wasn't in her personality to think of ways of creating a more budget-efficient version, or to improve its functionality. There was no helping that, so I turned the materials over to the diligent researchers, and asked them to research a substitute material that could be mass-produced.

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As for their results, there was apparently a species of silkworm whose cocoons had similar shock-absorbing properties to this material. Those cocoons could be mass-produced, so I was looking forward to their future research developments. Naturally, I'd told them what I knew about springs, and I had them researching those, too.

The truth was, the ones supporting this country weren't rulers like me, or geniuses like Genia, but those nameless researchers. It was important not to forget that.

It happened while I was resting my head in Aisha's lap with my eyes closed, thinking about that.

"Hey," Hal commented. "Looks like young Miss Carla's back."

Hearing that, I sat up. I called out to Tomoe and Kaede in the driver's seat to have them stop the wagon.

When I got out of the car, Carla was in the middle of landing. It wasn't a vertical drop; she came in at an angle to land like a passenger plane. She was probably landing that way to make sure no one saw up her apron dress.

"I have returned from scouting, Master," Carla reported, fixing her skirt which had gotten just a little ruffled in the landing. It looked like she'd gotten used to handling her miniskirt maid outfit.

When I decided to have Carla accompany me, I had thought it was a bit much to make her wear the maid uniform while traveling, and I had planned to let her wear the armor she'd used in the war. But Serina the head maid said, "I thought this might happen, so I prepared a maid outfit for traveling," and with a cool look on her face, she handed over the thing.

I used some of the materials that were offered to the royal family as gifts, ones where there were no other uses for, to improve my Little Musashibos, and it looked like this maid outfit used them, too. It was a superior product: blade-, arrow-, acid-, and heat-resistant; hard to stain, and easy to wash.

...Where does our head maid's passion come from, and where is it going? I wondered.

That aside, I praised Carla for her work.

"Well done. How was it?"

"There were no dangerous creatures up ahead... However..." Carla said awkwardly, looking at her winged back.

I looked at her, wondering what was up, when I noticed two tiny feet sticking out from under Carla's armpits. Carla turned to face the other way,

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and I saw a little human boy who was about five years old stuck to her back. The boy looked frightened, clinging tightly.

Carla seemed troubled, saying, “I found this boy alone and crying in an open spot on the mountains, and I couldn’t leave him alone, so I brought him back with me. He seems scared of something... and he won’t get down.” Carla shrugged as if to say she didn’t understand the reason at all.

“Isn’t he just scared because you flew through the sky?” I asked. It looked like she’d been flying at a pretty high altitude, so the boy had probably been clinging tightly so that he wouldn’t fall.

When I pointed that out, Carla’s eyes opened wide in realization. “Ah! Y-You’re right. I had forgotten that humans don’t fly.”

“Oh, come on...”

When I gave her a less-than-amused look, Carla blatantly averted her eyes.

Kaede and Tomoe spoke to the boy gently, and managed to coax him down from Carla’s back. But once he was down and the tension was relieved, the boy started to cry.

He was probably from a nearby village, and had gotten lost after wandering into the mountains. We had a boy on our hands who didn’t know his name, didn’t know where he lived, and kept on crying.

If I’d been the dog police officer in the song “Inu no Omawari-san,” this would be where I would start barking because I didn’t know what to do, and then give up.

The boy seemed to have taken to Carla because he was still clinging to her, and she was still panicking when I asked her, “Do we have anything to go on?”

“Uh... AH!” Carla cried. “Now that you mention it. I saw a number of strange men in the mountains.”

“Strange men?” I repeated.

“Yes. They had the appearance of filthy bandits. The fact that there were people like that lurking around in the area was one of the reasons I decided to take this kid with me.”

“Mountain bandits?” I pondered. “I haven’t heard any reports of bandits appearing in our territory...”

When I’d only just taken the throne, there were still occasional reports of thieves and mountain bandits. However, with the transportation network laid out, allowing troops to move around the country quickly, I stopped hearing

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reports of these sorts of robbers in the country. The only “thieves” I heard about were adventurers who took that name as their job title. Whenever there was a report of an incident, it was put down immediately, and if an armed band was found, the military would be sent to monitor them, or if necessary put them down.

That was how many groups of bandits had been defeated, or left the business of their own accord. Some of those bandits had actually been harmless, and for people like that... Ah!

“Hey, Carla, do you remember what color they were wearing?” I asked.

“Now that you bring it up... they were all wearing matching orange breastplates.”

“Yeah, I figured...” I said, nodding.

“You have some idea who they are, then?”

“Oh, I have more than an idea...”

I was the one who formed their organization.

We traveled for maybe another thirty minutes after that. When we brought the boy to the foot of the mountain where Carla said she had seen the men, the men in orange breastplates came out in force to greet us. I sent Carla ahead to explain the situation to them.

Like Carla had said, the men certainly did look like bandits. Their skin was tanned and swarthy, their faces thick with stubble, and they were a burly band of louts. They looked bad enough that Aisha and Hal tensed for battle when they saw them (Tomoe and Kaede were waiting inside the covered wagon), but the men showed no sign of bloodlust, and displayed no tension whatsoever.

One man who was larger than the rest stepped forward. “You the one, mister? I’m told you took a child into custody.”

The man spread his arms out in an exaggerated gesture, grinning.

“Yeah,” I said. “A member of our group took him in when she found him alone in the mountains.” It would be a pain to deal with it if our identities came out, so I explained the situation to him politely. “Have the boy’s relatives come to collect him?”

“Of course,” said the man. “Hey, you louts! Hurry up and bring the kid’s parents out!”

One of the men shouted, “Yessir!” and rushed off to the rear.

The way they talked, they were totally like a bandit boss and one of his

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minions.

Not long after that, a woman who looked like an innkeeper from a village threaded her way through the men to appear before us. That woman, who looked confused as she walked through the group of men, looked pleadingly at me with desperation on her face.

“Th-The boy... is my son, all right?! He wandered into the mountains on his own, and I haven’t heard from him since!”

So this was the boy’s mother? She must have been very worried.

“Please, relax,” I said. “There was no sign of him being injured.”

I asked Carla to bring the boy. When Carla brought him out from the cart, the little boy made a beeline for the woman the moment he saw her, jumping into her waiting arms.

“Moooooommy!”

The woman held him tight. “Thank goodness... Honestly, you silly boy! You had me worried sick!”

“I’m sor... sor... ry...”

“I’m really... glad you’re safe...”

The boy and his mother were reunited, and embraced.

While we watched that out of the corner of our eyes, the big man talked to me. “You really did us a favor there, mister. We’d split up to look for the kid, but we just weren’t having any luck. I wasn’t sure what we were gonna do.”

“No, like I said before, we only found him by coincidence.”

“Still, I’ve gotta thank you. I’m the leader of this band. The name’s Gonzales. From the look of you, you’re a merchant, are you?”

“Yes,” I said. “Kazuma Souya of The Silver Deer.”

It would cause trouble if it came out that I was the king, so I was using the alias I had prepared.

Gonzales went, “Hm?” and furrowed his brow. “Mister... Have we met somewhere before?”

“Have we? It’s my first time in these parts...”

“Am I imagining it? I feel like I’ve seen you somewhere before...”

“Well, I hope you’ll remember my face, then,” I said. “We’d appreciate your business at The Silver Deer.”

“Gahaha! You aren’t a merchant for nothing, huh?” Gonzales seemed to like that, because he slapped me hard on the back.

...It kind of hurt.

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When I played it off like that and returned to my companions, Hal said, “Would you mind explaining the situation already? Who are those men, anyway? They look like a band of brigands.”

“Well, they did used to be mountain bandits, after all.”

“Huh?! What’d you just say?!”

“Calm down, Hal,” I said. “There are all sorts of mountain bandits out there, you know.”

There were mountain bandits who attacked merchants and villagers, stealing their possessions, abducting their women and children, and even killing people. These were what you would call villainous bandits.

However, there were also those that occupied mountain roads, charged a toll for merchants to pass, and protected them in exchange. These were relatively respectable (?) bandits.

Whenever there were reports of the former, I would just send in the military to exterminate them; but for the latter, it was a shame to lose such talented people.

In a way, they were experts on the mountains. They often had roots in the area, maintaining good relations with the nearby villages, and it would be a waste to just throw away their knowledge and experience. So, here was what I did.

“I hired those mountain bandits, and had them form ‘mountain rescue teams.’”

“Mountain rescue teams?” Hal repeated.

“When someone gets lost in the mountains, like what happened here, they search for them. They also patrol the mountain to keep an eye out for any strange happenings, and they protect travelers on the roads, like they had been doing before. The country pays their wages. They charge a fare for protection on the mountain roads, but the money they collect goes into the national coffers. If they’re found to be skimming off the top, obviously, we treat them like normal mountain bandits.”

“Wow, you’ve sure got a lot going on...” Hal said, sounding impressed, but I had to smile wryly.

“Well, I’m the king, after all.”

“Oh, yeah, now that you mention it, I guess you are. I forget sometimes.”

“Yeah, I do, too.”

The two of us laughed together.

After that, we said our farewells to the mother, child, and mountain

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rescue team, and set off on the road once more.

With every meeting comes another parting, and we had other meetings to get to.

What sort of people would we meet on our trip? I was suddenly looking forward to finding out.

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Chapter 2: Time Begins to Move

“Ah... The scenery is beautiful, just beautiful.” I couldn’t help but let out a sigh of admiration.

This was northwest of the Kingdom of Friedonia, a small village on the border with the Orthodox Papal State of Lunaria.

Looking out further to the west from the center of the village, the bluish-green peaks of the Star Dragon Mountain Range stood there with an incredible sense of presence. Even though they were still a long ways away, they still looked so big. It was a series of mountains the size of Mt. Fuji, so I could understand why the view was so impactful.

Was Dracul, where the dragons lived, in the middle of those majestic mountains? Just what sort of place was it? I couldn’t even imagine.

“What’s the matter, Big Brother?” Tomoe called as I stared vacantly at the mountains.

“Hmm? I was thinking, ‘Those mountains sure are big.’”

“Yeah. They’re really big.”

Seeing Tomoe and me gazing at the mountains, Hal objected. “Oh, come on. You can see the Star Dragon Mountain Range all the way from the castle.”

“Hal, you just don’t get it,” Kaede chided the unsentimental Hal with a wry smile. “Both from afar and up close, they’re a breathtaking sight, but in different ways, you know.”

Aisha and Carla returned from leaving the wagon’s horses at the inn’s stable.

“Well then, Sir Kazuma,” Aisha said, “are we to wait here in this village until they come to ‘pick us up’?”

“...Uh, yeah,” I said. “That’s how it’s supposed to work.”

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Whoops. Because Aisha had addressed me as Kazuma there, like in the backstory I'd prepared for her, it had taken me a moment to respond.

Incidentally, in that backstory, I was the young heir to The Silver Deer, and I was traveling around many countries to find potential trade goods. Tomoe was my little sister, and I had her hiding her wolf ears and tail beneath that hooded robe.

The other four, Aisha, Halbert, Kaede, and Carla, were playing the role of adventurers we'd hired to protect us in our travels. For this trip, I'd actually talked things over with the adventurers' guild and had them registered as such.

In an alternate plan, I would have been an adventurer, too, but it stood out so badly that my skill level was below that of the these four that I had to give up on that one. It was true that I was weak, but they were almost too strong. We had the best fighters in the kingdom with us, after all.

Let's get back to the story.

The arrangement was that we would wait here for our escort from the Star Dragon Mountain Range to arrive. However, there was no set time for that. It was possible we would be delayed on our trip here, so we could only decide on a vague time, within a day or two of our arrival.

I said, "Well, if we just wait—"

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"—they'll make contact with... Uh... Wait, what?"

I had been responding to Aisha, but suddenly she was gone from my side. Actually, Tomoe, Hal, Kaede, and Carla were gone, too. More than that, everything including the village and its buildings had vanished in an instant.

The next thing I knew, I was standing alone in the middle of a field.

What, why am I in a field?! Where did everyone go?!

It was a desolate field with no sign of people or buildings.

Let... Let me tell you what happened! I was in the village, but I somehow ended up in a field. You... You guys think I don't know what I'm talking about...

Wait, this wasn't the time to be joking around.

Unable to believe the situation I'd found myself in, I was looking around restlessly, trying to find someone else, when the whole area suddenly went dark. Had it clouded over...? No, that wasn't it! There was something massive

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up in the sky, and it was blotting out the sun. When I looked up to see what it was, there flew a massive dragon, twenty meters in length.

"Awhuhwhuh?!" I babbled incoherently at the incredible sight.

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Bzzt.

Huh? Just now, for a moment, I felt something on my cheek... she thought.

At that same time, in her cave on the Dracul Plateau, Naden quizzically tilted her head to the side.

Naden had once again shut herself in today to watch broadcast programs from the Gran Chaos Empire, but she just felt something weird in her cheeks. It was small, like a little bug had landed there. However, when she rubbed her squishy cheeks, there was nothing there.

"...Well, whatever." Naden returned to watching the broadcast program.

Suddenly, Pai rushed up to her in human form. "This is huge, Naden!"

The very next moment, *bang,* Pai struck her leg on the table. While Pai crouched down and grasped her leg in pain, the still hot tea that had been sitting on the table splashed all over Naden's tail.

"Hiyahhhhh!" It was so hot Naden let out a scream that could have come from a kung-fu movie star.

Thrashing around, she almost knocked the simple receiver over, but desperately stopped herself just short enough to keep from breaking it. Meanwhile, Pai, who had already recovered from the pain in her leg, was looking at Naden in exasperation.

Groaning, Pai said, "What are you doing, Naden?"

"What am *I* doing?! This is all *your* fault! It was hot, okay?!"

"Hold on, that doesn't matter right now," said Pai. "This is a much bigger deal."

"That was a big deal to me! If I break this receiver, I may not find another one..."

"I'm telling you, there's something more important going on!"

"You can talk all you want. I'm going to sleep."

Naden went to lie down in the bed she had acquired from the outside world, but Pai, who had a sulky look on her face, put a stop to that.

"No sleeping! Listen to me! Lady Tiamat has summoned you!"

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"...Eep." Naden froze stiff just as she was about to get into bed.

Tiamat, who was also known as Mother Dragon, the ruler of the Star Dragon Mountain Range, was sacred and inviolable, and her existence was an absolute. Not even the dragons could lay eyes on her revered face without good reason. Only when they were invited by her to perform some function, or on some other business, were they able to stand in her presence.

Furthermore, about the only time she summoned them was when she meant to bestow some honor on them, or harsh punishment.

Pai looked at Naden pityingly. "What'd you go and do this time, Naden?"

"Could you not immediately assume I'm getting punished?" Naden griped.

"Well, have you done anything you'd deserve to be honored for?"

"...No..."

While Naden was wracking her brains, thinking, *What could I have done...?* the idol dancing and singing on her simple receiver caught her eye. There were some dragons with more traditional values who opposed bringing in things from the human world like this.

"You think it's this?" Naden stared at the simple receiver.

Pai sighed. "They say Tiamat can see everything in the whole world. She definitely knows."

"I-If it was a problem, she would have told me off for it sooner!" Naden protested. "That's never happened, okay?"

"Wasn't she just letting it slide before? Or can you think of another reason?"

"A reason... Maybe that I've crossed the border over thirty times now?"

"You've been going out that much?! Wait, I've got another idea. Naden, you refused to participate in the Contract Ceremony, didn't you?"

"But... I mean..." Naden's face turned gloomy.

The Contract Ceremony, when the young knights of the Nothung Dragon Knight Kingdom came to form marriage contracts with the dragons, was a grand occasion for the dragons that came around once in a lifetime. However, for an odd, wingless dragon like Naden it was only a place where she would be a laughingstock.

Pai knew how Naden felt about it, but she also knew that skipping out on things would only isolate Naden more, so she was stern. "You skipped the dance practice for the Contract Ceremony, didn't you?"

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During the ceremony, a knight and dragon would dance together as proof of their newly formed contract. Then, when the dragon had finished dancing in human form, she would take on the form of a dragon, and their contract would be formally established when they departed the Star Dragon Mountain Range together. The dance lessons were to prepare for this.

Naden puffed up her cheeks and pouted, turning her head to the side and refusing to make eye contact. “There’s no point in practicing for an event I have no intention of attending.”

Pai groaned. “Didn’t you get in a fight with Ruby and the others a little while ago, too?”

“They made fun of me for not being able to fly!”

“Don’t you think the combination of all that is what’s getting you called in now? In my opinion, it’s impressive she let you get away with all of that for so long.”

“Urgh...” Naden had no response to that.

“But, well, if she’s never said anything to you before, I don’t think you’re going to suddenly get punished for it, you know?” Pai said with a sigh. “If you’re doing something wrong, you ought to be scolded first.”

“Y-Yeah!” Naden said with relief.

“But even if it’s just a warning this time, will that change how you behave?” Pai put her hand down on the simple receiver as she spoke. “If she told you to dispose all these things you picked up in the lower world...”

“That’s like telling me to die!”

“It’s that bad?” Pai asked.

Naden pulled the exasperated Pai’s hand off the receiver and hid it behind her back. “I can’t throw this out. The simple receiver is my longing for the outer world.”

“And the romance novels?”

“My longing to have someone choose me.”

“What are you, a maiden with your head full of dreams?”

“I *am* a maiden. ...Even if I’m like this.”

Pai shrugged her shoulders in dismay. “Whatever; just be ready for it. Even if she’s going to be mad at you, it’s best to get it done with quickly.”

With Pai admonishing her like that, Naden reluctantly turned off the receiver.

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The big dragon descending from the heavens began to shine when it touched the ground. The outlines of its form blurred in the light, shrinking down to human size.

When the light subsided, before me stood a woman wearing all-white robes, a square hood over her head, and a thin veil over her face. It was hard to be sure with her face mostly covered, but she was maybe in her forties. Well, in a world with long-lived races, it was basically impossible to rely on how old someone looked, though.

The woman in white walked up to me. “You are King Souma Kazuya of the United Kingdom of Elfrieden and Amidonia, I presume?”

“I am... Are you here from the Star Dragon Mountain Range?”

The woman brought a hand to her chest and bowed to me. “I come on behalf of Lady Tiamat, our mother dragon. I will now bring you to the Dracul Plateau in the Star Dragon Mountain Range.”

“Our mother dragon”... Oh, that’d be that *Mother Dragon, I guess. Was Tiamat her name...? Wait, huh? Tiamat... Wasn’t that the name of the oldest dragon to appear in Earth’s legends?* I vaguely remembered it because the name had shown up in all sorts of things.

For starters, it was said that Mother Dragon had been around since before the people of this continent had formed countries, so she lived up to the name, at least.

I asked the lady in white, “And might I inquire as to whom I have the pleasure of speaking with?”

“There’s no need to be so polite with me. I am one of the priestesses in the service of Lady Tiamat.”

“A priestess?”

“Yes. The dragons are a race that live a thousand years. However, if a dragon’s partner leaves this world before they can have children, that dragon lives in solitude for a long time. Such dragons return to the Star Dragon Mountain Range, becoming priestesses who serve Lady Tiamat. They care for her, maintain Crystal Castle, and look after the young dragons.”

In other words, dragons who lost their families returned to the Star Dragon Mountain Range to become priestesses.

“Can’t they get remarried to another knight?” I asked.

“There are some who can,” the woman said. “However, this is a matter of fate. It is up to the guidance of destiny, and to the blessing of Lady Tiamat who binds the fates of men and dragons.”

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The guidance of destiny, huh. Was Mother Dragon a god of matchmaking or something like that, then?

That aside, I decided to ask the question that had been bothering me for a while now.

“By the way, where is this? I’m pretty sure I was with my companions in the village where we agreed to meet just a moment ago...”

“This field lies five kilometers to the northeast of that village,” the woman said. “Lady Tiamat used her power to move you here.”

Who could have expected teleportation?! Appearing in dreams, instantly transporting people... Mother Dragon’s power really was off the charts. I could see why people might worship her.

“Can all dragons do things like that?!” I exclaimed.

“No,” the priestess said. “It is only possible for Lady Tiamat, who has lived an eternity, and who is worshiped as a god. It is her divine intervention, you might say. Rest assured, she will never use that power for her own selfish desires.”

“...I hope I can believe that.”

Used correctly, it was a power with limitless destructive potential, after all. This was someone I didn’t want, and couldn’t afford, to make an enemy of. I wanted very much for her to be a god that watched over the world, but didn’t intervene in it.

I scratched my head. “Anyway, you were saying you’d take me to Dracul, but what about the companions I left behind in that village? I may not have been coronated yet, but I am a king, you know? Didn’t my sudden disappearance cause a total panic back there?”

The dragon priestess looked at me apologetically, and bowed her head deeply. “I must apologize. Due to the urgency of our circumstances, while I do realize this is rude, I ask that you come to Dracul alone. One of my fellow priestesses is heading to your followers now to explain the situation. We will invite your followers to come on another day, at some time before the day of the ceremony.”

“Will I be getting an explanation of those circumstances?” I asked.

“Please, ask Lady Tiamat for the details. I will just say... Lady Tiamat wishes for you to participate in this year’s Contract Ceremony.”

The Contract Ceremony... That was where the knights and dragons formed marriage contracts, right? Did this mean that, just as Hakuya had hoped, I would be participating as one of the partners?

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“I’m the King of Friedonia, you know?” I said. “I’m not from the Nothung Dragon Knight Kingdom, and I have absolutely no intent of becoming a dragon knight.”

“That is not a problem,” the priestess said confidently. “If Lady Tiamat says you are worthy to participate, that is all there is to it. Besides which, I hear the first king of Elfrieden was a hero who formed a contract with a dragon.”

The priestess spoke with certainty, as if Mother Dragon’s words were absolute. Even if they were... I didn’t know what to say about being suddenly told to marry a dragon I’d never even met before. Well, my engagements to Liscia and Roroa had been the same way, but it wasn’t exactly a thing you got used to.

“But isn’t the contract a vow between husband and wife?” I asked. “I still haven’t married them yet, but I already have four fiancées, you know? Is that okay?”

“That is, again, no problem,” the priestess said. “This contract is, by no means, something that has already been decided on. If you do not wish to form a contract with anyone, human or dragon, you may make that decision.”

Oh, I see, I thought. *The Contract Ceremony isn’t something I’ll be forced into in any way? It’s more like a matchmaking session that’s hard to get out of because I can’t afford to offend my parents or the other party, then. If that’s all...* I was beginning to feel better about the situation.

“However, Lady Tiamat is one who binds the fates of humans and dragons,” said the woman. “Lady Tiamat went to the trouble of calling you here, so I suspect that there is someone that you are meant to meet there.”

I was speechless.

The priestess said that with the same confidence as before.

Did that mean there was a dragon in the Star Dragon Mountain Range who was fated to be with me? And, if I went there, was I going to be stuck taking her as my wife? Just like the god of matchmaking, Mother Dragon, had claimed?

When I thought of how Liscia and the others would react, my head started to hurt.

Then the dragon priestess began to shine once more and turned into a dragon. “Now, I will take you to Dracul at once.”

“Wha?! Right now?!”

“Yes. Lady Tiamat said it was urgent.”

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Urgent? Were the circumstances that pressing?

The dragon priestess grabbed me tightly with her large front leg. Oh, it was covered in a thin layer of fur, and was kind of warm... Wait, now wasn't the time to think about that!

"Hold on, I'm not emotionally prepared for—wait, ah!"

"Now, let us be on our way."

"Hold on! Ahhhhhhhhh!"

I was instantly taken away into the sky.

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"Oh..." For an instant, Naden felt her cheeks buzz again.

It was slightly numbing, like there was a jolt of electricity passing through them. It felt stronger than the last time, too.

Naden wondered what it could be, but... she had bigger concerns. After all, she had been summoned by Mother Dragon right now.

In the center of the Dracul Plateau was a lake, Lake Drag, large enough that waves formed on its surface. In that lake was Crystal Castle, where Mother Dragon resided.

That palace was made from an unknown material that was translucent like crystal, and it was more massive than any castle in the world outside the Star Dragon Mountain Range. The master of that castle, Mother Dragon, was the size of a hill herself, so it was only natural that her residence be so large.

Naden was in Crystal Castle's waiting room. Everyone who'd been called in by Mother Dragon would wait in this room, then be magically summoned to appear in front of her when she had time to see them.

Incidentally, though there were no strict rules about this, it was customary to take dragon form, not human form, when having a meeting with Mother Dragon. This was because their human form was a temporary one, taken for the pledge with a knight, and it was seen as inappropriate to appear before a godbeast like Mother Dragon in it. However, Naden was still in her human form.

She hadn't done that because she would be appearing before Mother Dragon. Naden was usually in human form. She hated her dragon form, which had gotten her ridiculed as a "flightless lizard" and a "worm." To put it simply, she'd developed a complex about it.

Does having wings... and being able to fly make you all so great...?

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Naden muttered in her head.

The area around her suddenly began glowing. Then, the very next moment, a massive silver dragon the size of a hill appeared.

Her eyes sparkled like sapphires. Her horns looked incredibly strong. Her wings were large and powerful, with feathers like a bird's, each of them was as large as a broadsword.

Furthermore, her entire body was covered with smooth hair, and in the light that shone down from the open ceiling, she sparkled with a color that went back and forth between silver and rainbow. She was a being so absolute that even Naden, who had seen her many times now, gulped and stared in awe each time they met.

She was the queen of dragons, the holy mother dragon: Tiamat.

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When Naden came back to her senses, she knelt down, putting a hand over her breast and bowing her head. "...Naden Delal. Here at your behest."

Naden was feigning calmness, but her heart was pounding. She couldn't help but worry about why Mother Dragon might be upset with her.

Is it my skipping practice for the Contract Ceremony? Is it my fighting with the other dragons? Or... is it my having brought a simple receiver made in the Gran Chaos Empire back here? Oh, what am I going to do if she tells me to get rid of it...?

"Raise your head, Naden."

Naden heard that peaceful voice come from above her head. It had a depth that sounded like three people speaking at the same time, as if it were echoing inside the listener's own heart.

When she raised her head like the voice told her to, those sapphire eyes were staring right at Naden's face. In that tense atmosphere, Naden thought she could feel the sweat running down her back.

"Um... Er..."

Naden tried to say something, but her tongue just wouldn't move right.

Tiamat didn't seem angry with her. If anything, it was a soft look on her face.

She's not going to get mad at me? Then why did I get called here? Why is Lady Tiamat looking at me with such gentle eyes?

Those questions sprang to mind one after another, throwing Naden's heart into disarray. "Um... Lady Tiamat...?"

When she managed to force just those words out, Tiamat began speaking softly.

"The furiously moving gear approaches the gear that has come to a stop."

"...Huh?" Naden had no idea what had just been said to her. Gears? What was she even talking about?

Without any concern for Naden's confusion, Tiamat continued. "Eventually, the two gears will mesh. The stopped gear will be forced to move, and the gear that spins furiously as if driven by something will slow its pace. However, that is nothing to be sad about. It merely means that they will spin at the same pace."

"U-Um... I have no idea what you're talking about...?"

It was too abstract for Naden to make sense of. Had she been called here to hear this? The furiously spinning gear... The stopped gear... The meshing of the two...?

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“Naden.”

“Y-Yes!”

With Tiamat’s eyes fixed straight on her, Naden stood up straight.

“Be prepared. It will soon begin to move.”

Prepared? Begin to move? What would, exactly...?

“Um... Lady Tiamat... just what is going to start moving?” Naden ventured.

Tiamat took on the face of an angel delivering a revelation, or a mother watching over her child, and told her:

“Your time.”

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Chapter 3: The Narrowing Distance Between the Two

"Cold... High... Scary..."

Right now, I was flying through the skies, being carried by the dragon priestess.

My body was wrapped in the dragon's hand, so it was reasonably warm, but my face was directly exposed to the wind, and it was very cold.

That, and it was scary being this high up. It had nothing to do with acrophobia—I'm pretty sure anyone who suddenly found themselves skydiving with no past experience would be scared. That was what this was like.

"I apologize for the inconvenience," the dragon priestess said. "However, a dragon only lets her partner ride on her back. Please forgive me for carrying you like this."

The dragon priestess sounded apologetic, but I wasn't convinced that was the problem here.

"No, it's not that I wanted to ride on your back..."

Honestly, the only reason I wasn't even more freaked out was that only my head was exposed. If I'd been riding on her back, feeling the speed and wind pressure with my whole body, I'm confident I would have passed out.

The members of our Air Force fly this high, too... I realized.

The dragon priestess asked, "Are you afraid of high places, Sir Souma?"

"Huh? Uh, yeah. Kinda..."

"In that case, I will go faster so we can arrive at our destination sooner." With that, the dragon priestess accelerated rapidly.

"No, that doesn't mean I want you to go fasteeeeeerrrrrrrrrr!"

I screamed the loudest I had that day.

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“Eek!” Naden shrieked.

Having left Crystal Castle, she’d been on her way back to her den when the biggest jolt she’d felt all day had hit her.

This wasn’t like mere static electricity; this was like squeezing your foot tightly when it was numb from you sitting on it for too long, or suddenly having someone grab your sides. It was that sort of ticklish and stimulating feeling.

Naden rubbed her cheeks and said, “I thought it might be my cheeks, but could this be—”

She was then interrupted by something else.

“You there, worm,” a high-handed voice said snootily.

When Naden turned to react, there were three girls there. One was a beautiful young girl with defiant eyes and rolls of curly hair who looked like the epitome of haughtiness, while the remaining two were her blue- and green-haired flunkies.

The girl with rolls of red curls was Ruby; the flunky with the short blue hair was Sapphire; and the flunky with the long green hair was Emerada.

Naden had been walking on a little road in the forest. The three of them were standing to block it.

With a look of utter contempt on her face, Naden walked toward the three of them. “Oh, look... the three stooges.”

“Who’re you calling stooges?!” Ruby exclaimed.

“Well, should I call you drag-ons instead?” Naden quipped.

“Huh? Where is that pause in the middle coming from?”

“From how this keeps dragging on. You keep coming to bother me for no good reason.”

As one might have guessed from this exchange, Naden hated these three. This country was unwelcoming, both in a geographic and diplomatic sense, so many of the dragons had inward-looking personalities, too. That was why there was no shortage of dragons who mocked her as a “wingless dragon” or “worm.”

Dragons prided themselves as being creatures revered as godbeasts, so most of them wouldn’t tell Naden how they looked down on her to her face. But they still said it maliciously behind her back.

These three were the only ones who would openly mess with Naden.

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Red-haired Ruby mockingly said, “Hmph! I heard you were called out by Lady Tiamat, so I came to see if you finally got yourself thrown out. Well? Was she mad?”

“Too bad for you, then,” Naden shot back. “There wasn’t anything she was upset about.”

“Hmph. Then why were you summoned?”

“I don’t see how that’s any of your business. Now get out of my way.”

Naden tried to pass the three of them, but Ruby immediately blocked her.

Naden tried to turn back the way she had come, but Sapphire and Emerada had sealed it off.

“...You three, cut it out, would you?!”

When Naden glared at them, Ruby took on a nasty grin.

“Oh, yes, it’s the Contract Ceremony soon, isn’t it?”

Naden gulped. The three circled around her, with Ruby closely scrutinizing her face.

“It’s so romantic,” Ruby said. “The young dragons and knights all meet, the noble knights offer their hands to the dragons, and the dragons accept their hands to become lifelong partners. It’s the highlight of every dragon’s life. The moment when we can be said to shine our brightest.”

Naden was silent.

“On that most important of days, I wonder if there will be a knight who would deign to choose you.” The corners of Ruby’s lips turned up, and her fang-like canines peeked out. It was an unpleasant smile. “Dragons prefer strong knights. Strong knights produce prosperous descendants, a mark of pride for any dragon. Knights prefer magnificent, majestic dragons. For the knights of Nothung, the dragons are their partners both in marriage and on the battlefield. In order to distinguish themselves in battle and to move up in the ranks—not to mention survive—they’ll choose strong, majestic, and ferocious dragons.”

Triumphant and mocking, Ruby’s words beat against Naden’s ears.

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“But what about you? Will there be a knight who would choose you? You, who have no wings, don’t breathe fire, and can’t fly? Even if there is, what will he do? Is he going to ride you? Watching the rest of the dragon knights fly through the sky while he fights on a dragon that’s little better than a horse? Ahaha, what an idiot. He won’t be moving up in the world, that’s for sure!”

Bzzt!

Ruby jumped backward as that sound suddenly came from Naden.

Naden’s hair began to stand on end, and her body was wreathed in pale blue electrical discharge. Her voluminous hair spread out, wriggling in the air like tentacles.

Naden turned to Ruby, pointing a finger at her as she said, “Shut your filthy mouth. If you don’t, I’ll paralyze you.”

“Hmph! Do it, if you can.”

In the next moment, a blue bolt of electricity shot forth from Naden’s fingertip. However, by the time it reached its target, Ruby was no longer there, and the trunk of the tree that had been behind her was singed instead.

Naden looked up into the sky and howled, “Tch! Get down here, you dirty coward!”

There were three dragons, red, green, and blue, hanging in the air; it was none other than Ruby and her flunkies. The three flapped their membranous, wyvern-like wings as they looked down at Naden.

“What’s the matter? Weren’t you going to paralyze us?” In her red dragon form, Ruby seemed to have become even more spiteful. “Oh, right. Even if you can control electric shocks, you can’t hit us if you can’t fly.”

“Shut up!” Naden yelled.

“Who would ever choose you?”

“Shut up, shut up, shut up!”

“You had better participate in the ceremony. Don’t run away. Though I’m sure no one will choose you, it would be good to see you put in your place.”

“Ngh!” Naden cried.

Naden ran away, turning her back on Ruby and the other two.

Damn it... Damn it...

She didn’t want to let them see her tears of sadness and frustration. If she cried, it would only let them bask in their sense of superiority. Not a chance.

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Though I'm sure no one will choose you.

As Ruby's words echoed in her ears, she imagined the other dragons mocking her at the Contract Ceremony.

Pai and Lady Tiamat told her to participate, but she wouldn't let anyone make a laughingstock of her!

Who... Who would go to the stupid Contract Ceremony?!

Naden vanished into the forest.

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Having adjusted to flying at high speeds, I spoke to the dragon priestess as we got closer to the Star Dragon Mountain Range.

"So, I wanted to ask a question."

"What might that be?" she asked.

"This Dracul place, where the dragons live—it's on top of those mountains, right?"

"Yes. That is correct."

"I'm still fine now, but if you carry me up there, am I going to be all right when it comes to air and whatnot? I'd rather not suffer from altitude sickness."

This was the Star Dragon Mountain Range, a series of mountains the size of Mt. Fuji. The Dracul Plateau itself was kept in a state of perpetual spring by Mother Dragon's magic, and the air there was no different from the air at ground level, but what about the route there?

If I was going to be going through an experience equivalent to suddenly being chucked to the top of Mt. Fuji, that would be hazardous to my health.

The dragon priestess shook her head. "You need not fear. Once we enter the Star Dragon Mountain Range, Lady Tiamat's magical power will directly transport you the rest of the way to Crystal Castle in Dracul."

...So there you had it. Basically, it was going to be another teleportation like I had experienced earlier.

"In that case, couldn't she have just transported me to that castle or wherever to begin with?"

"Lady Tiamat can only exercise her fullest power within the Star Dragon Mountain Range. In other lands, her abilities are greatly restricted. When you get to be as far away as that village, she can only teleport you short distances."

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...Could a few kilometers really be called a short distance?

Well, it seemed she couldn't suddenly send dragons anywhere on the continent, at least, so that was a bit of a relief. I didn't even have an inkling of any intentions to oppose her, but it was still unsettling to have her unilaterally hold the power of life and death over me. Though, well, I could certainly tell that Mother Dragon was on an entirely different level from other creatures.

While I was thinking that, the dragon priestess picked up speed. "We will soon enter the Star Dragon Mountain Range. Please, brace yourself for transportation."

"Brace myself? How am I supposed to do that?"

"Don't be surprised if the scenery around you suddenly changes."

"Oh, so that's what you meant..."

The dragon priestess's speed slowed, and when she had almost come to a stop...

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...the scenery changed. We had just been in midair, but now the floor was beneath my feet.

The dragon priestess set me down, and I was finally able to get my feet back on terra firma.

I looked around, wondering where I might be. It was bright, so I could see well, but it was an incredibly vast space I'd found myself in. There was a white wall in front of my eyes, but when I turned to look behind me, the wall on the opposite side was a long ways off. This place might be larger than a domed stadium.

When I looked up to the ceiling, still thinking about that, I gulped again. *It's not a wall?!*

What I found myself looking up at was a giant dragon's head. Right now, I was at the breast of a massive dragon that was sitting like the sphinx. That head... It was the same dragon I had seen in my dream.

Did that mean this supermassive dragon was Mother Dragon? I'd thought she was big when I saw her in my dreams, but because it'd been a dream, her size had been kind of hazy. When I saw her up close and personal like this, she seemed even bigger than I'd assumed in my dream.

I heard a voice from above. "You've done well. Let us have some time

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alone.”

The dragon who had carried me this far said, “Understood.”

She bowed her head, and was then erased. Mother Dragon probably teleported her away.

While I was still dumbstruck, Mother Dragon addressed me in a gentle (though psychic) voice. “Now then, I think it would be much too haughty of me to remain in this form when before the master of a nation.”

With that said, her body began to shine and then shrink down. When the brilliant light subsided, I beheld a woman who was roughly the same height as me. Her face was covered by a veil, so I couldn’t tell her age or appearance, but the woman was wearing a shining, silver robe-like garment, and had a well-balanced figure. As with the arms of the Venus de Milo, not being able to see her face made me imagine it to be incredibly beautiful.

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“Is that... your human form?” I was awestruck, but somehow managed to get those words out.

She chuckled. “Is this my human form, you ask? That’s an apt name for it.” The woman lifted the hem of her robe and bowed. “I am pleased to meet you in person like this. Greetings, King Souma of Elfrieden and Amidonia. I am Tiamat, the one responsible for the Star Dragon Mountain Range.”

“It’s an honor to meet you, Madam Mother Dragon.” I returned her bow. “I am King Souma of Friedonia.”

Mother Dragon chuckled. “That name is something others just started calling me of their own accord. Please, call me Tiamat.”

“As you wish, Madam Tiamat. Um... sorry about my appearance.”

Much too late, I realized I was still in that Kitakaze Kozou-style traveler’s outfit. I felt bad standing in front of the divine figure I saw before me in this state. I had no time to change clothes, after all. But when I said that, Madam Tiamat shook her head.

“No, you look like that because I called you here so suddenly. If anyone should apologize, it is me. For a start... let’s sit down.”

A table made of glass and two matching chairs suddenly appeared between us. Teleportation sure was a convenient ability. If I had that, I could instantly find the documents I was looking for when working, so I really wanted it...

I was thinking like a total slave to my job.

Once we sat down, Madam Tiamat began by bowing her head deeply. “First, allow me to apologize for bringing you here so forcibly.”

“I will accept that apology,” I said. “But could I ask you to explain your reasons? I was already on my way here with my companions when you did so.”

“I will tell you, of course. But first...”

Suddenly, a tea set appeared before my eyes. The teacup sitting in front of me was already filled with a warm serving of black tea.

“Let’s have tea. Do you take sugar or milk?”

“No, straight is fine.”

It was time for me to stop being surprised by every little thing. She was worshiped as a god, after all.

I took a sip of tea to calm my nerves. I was more of a coffee person, honestly, but... it had a good fragrance. Tiamat drank her tea, then took a breath before opening her mouth to speak.

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“Now, as for what led me to force you to come here, that is because there is an urgent situation that threatens the Star Dragon Mountain Range. In order to resolve it, I need your.... no, the powers of *all* of you. That is why I’ve summoned you here, well aware that I may cause offense.”

She had some sort of situation on her hands? And what did she mean about the powers of *all* of us? As far as I could tell, I was the only one here.

“What exactly is this urgent situation you speak of?” I asked.

“A storm is approaching the Star Dragon Mountain Range,” Madam Tiamat said with a mysterious tone in her voice.

A storm? Wasn’t Dracul a plateau at an altitude equivalent to the peak of Mt. Fuji? Wouldn’t they hear the thunder coming from below up here? But thinking about it a bit longer, I remembered the peak of Mt. Fuji could get still storms. They say cumulonimbus clouds can go all the way up to the stratosphere, after all. No, but before that...

“Even our country can’t do anything about natural phenomena,” I said.

“Of course, this isn’t a ‘natural phenomenon.’”

“...Is it a metaphor of some sort?”

“Yes, that’s right. I expressed an impending threat as a storm. In order to deal with this storm, we will need your power, Sir Souma, and that of one other. In order to bind the two of you together, I needed you to come to the Star Dragon Mountain Range on your own.”

Madam Tiamat spoke in a quiet voice, almost like she was composing poetry.

“There is little time. If we waited for you to come together with your entourage, there was the risk that the situation would get out of hand. However, even if we explained the situation, there is no way the vassals of a king would allow him to go to another country alone. Because of that, we resorted to somewhat more forceful methods. I once again apologize. I’m sorry for what we put you through.”

Madam Tiamat offered a sincere bow.

I had the mother dragon who was revered as a god bowing her head to me. What would Liscia and the others say if they heard about this?

That aside, she said she spirited me away because there was “little time,” but she was being awfully vague as to the reason why.

“You’ve apologized enough,” I said. “Could I trouble you for a more concrete explanation about this storm, or whatever it is?”

“The storm will definitely come. I cannot touch the storm directly.

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However, my children cannot handle it themselves. Except... for one of them. The storm will be a miserable calamity. We need you, who will be the key to dealing with it, and that girl who will carry you. It is a miracle that the calamity and the means of resolving it have encountered one another in this time frame, but looking at the eternal flow of time as a whole, it may have been an inevitability."

I was silent. I really didn't get it.

I scratched the back of my neck. "I do think this roundabout way of discussing things is fitting for a god, but..."

"If you find it unpleasant, I apologize once more. However, this is the most 'guidance' I can hand down."

"Guidance..." I muttered.

"I am a being who exists to raise and watch over those who live on this continent of Landia. I can offer advice that guides things in a better direction, but I have not been given the authority to intervene directly in individual matters."

"If you haven't been given the authority, does that mean there's someone who exists at a higher level than you?!" I exclaimed.

Mother Dragon was held up as the highest god by the practitioners of Mother Dragon worship. If there was a being in a position to give her authority, wouldn't that make that being the actual highest god? If the practitioners of Mother Dragon worship heard this (setting aside the issue of whether they'd even believe it), it could cause incredible chaos...

While I was staring, dumbfounded, Madam Tiamat silently shook her head.

"There once was. But they are no more."

"R-Really?"

Was this like saying *God is dead*? I couldn't make a decision based on the information available to me, but Madam Tiamat gave me a slightly sad smile.

"Yes. However, the limitations placed upon me live on. That is how I was born, and so I must continue to abide by those limitations. Even knowing my own children will be exposed to the storm, I myself can do nothing about it."

"So you called me here because of that storm?" I hedged.

"That is correct."

"I think, as far as humans go, I'm one of the weaker ones in this world,

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though.”

“Martial prowess has nothing to do with it,” she said. “Your very existence is the key.”

“Does that have something to do with how I was summoned as a hero?”

“Yes. However, I am unable to tell you precisely how.”

“I dunno...” I scratched my head.

Going purely off the information provided to me, this didn’t seem like something I could make a decision on easily. However, seeing how sincere Madam Tiamat was, I could be absolutely sure that the situation was pressing, at the very least.

Argh. If I had Hakuya and his oratory skills here, I might have been able to extract as much information from Madam Tiamat as was possible within her limitations; and if I had any one of Liscia, Aisha, Juna, and Roroa with me, I could have consulted them on what to do.

Speaking of Liscia and the others...

“Madam Tiamat,” I said. “I’d like you to answer just one thing for me.”

“What might that be? I hope it’s something I’m not restricted from telling you.”

“It’s a yes or no question.” I finished my tea and calmed myself, then sat up, looked Madam Tiamat straight in the eye, and asked her, “Is this storm, or whatever it is, something that would harm me, or those who are going to become my family?”

If I couldn’t know all the details anyway, I at least wanted to make sure of the one thing that was most important to me.

Madam Tiamat’s response: “Yes.”

That more or less decided my answer for me.

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Naden was running through the forest.

She ran straight down the game trails, trying not to think about anything. That was because if, while thinking, she considered her situation for even a moment, she felt like she would be crushed under the weight of her sadness.

As she ran, Naden’s body transformed. She became four-legged; her body thickened and grew longer; and she sprouted deer-like antlers, a long tail, and two whip-like whiskers. She had taken on her dragon form.

She twisted her gigantic body around, slithering between the trees like a

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snake. There were, of course, no wings on her back.

Does having wings make you so great?! She asked herself the same question she had so many times before in her life. *Is it so wrong not to have wings? Geez... I don't even know anymore! What do you want me to do?! There's nothing I can do!*

At some point, tears had begun to fall from her red eyes. They wouldn't stop.

Enough! I don't care anymore!

She kept running, and eventually came out of the woods.

She'd come to a rocky place. It was a sheer cliff, and the far edge of the area that Tiamat's magic kept in a state of everlasting spring. This was the edge of Dracul. The setting sun had dyed the sea of clouds that spread out below her red.

The scenery here truly was fit to be called breathtaking. However, Naden didn't have the presence of mind to take it in right now.

She leaned out over the cliff, stretching out her long neck and shouting as loudly as she could in thought-speak: "You stupid suuuuuuuun!"

She added out loud, "Roooooooooooooar!"

Ooooooooooooooar...

Ooooooooar...

Ooooar...

Screaming out in psychic speech while roaring at the same time, her roar echoed as it vanished away to somewhere beyond the clouds.

Naden stood there, glaring into the sun.

"Th-That ryuu's going through adolescence." A voice that was lacking in tension came from behind Naden.

"Wha?!"

When the surprised Naden turned back, there was a young man in unfamiliar garb, standing there and looking at her like he'd seen something unbelievable. The young man wearing a traveler's cloak over top of his shirt, and a conical straw hat was scratching his cheek as he looked at her, unsure what to do.

"I know from Madam Tiamat and the dragon priestess that it's possible to talk with them, but when I see a ryuu girl shouting something out of an adolescent drama... I just don't know how to react," he added.

Naden's eyes went wide. *What is a human doing here? And in that strange outfit... He's not a knight from the Nothung Dragon Knight Kingdom,*

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is he?

While she got information from the Empire through her simple receiver, Naden knew nearly nothing about the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago, so she didn't know the young man's outfit was from there.

Continuing to stare at Naden, the young man opened his mouth and said, "Still, I'd heard the Star Dragon Mountain Range was a nation of dragons.... But I never imagined there would be a ryuu here, too. I feel like I understand this world less and less."

A "ryuu"... That was what the young man had called Naden. "Ryuu" was another word for dragon. Naden opened her eyes wide.

"A ryuu, huh..." she said coldly, thinking he might have meant it sarcastically. "I don't have wings, you know."

But the young man tilted his head to the side. "Huh? That's obvious, isn't it? Ryuus don't have wings."

"Huh? What are you talking about? Ryuus are supposed to have wings, aren't they?"

"Huh? If you're talking about a ryuu with wings, there's the ouryuu, also called the yinglong, but aren't they supposed to be kind of a unique case?"

"Huh?" Naden asked.

"Huh?"

It seemed there was some inconsistency in their understanding.

"Hold on," Naden said, "When you say ryuu... you mean a dragon, right?"

"A dragon? ...Oh, I see. So that's it."

The young man clapped his hands together, as if something suddenly made sense to him. Then, picking up a branch, he drew two characters, 龍 and 竜, on the ground.

"In the world I came from, we had the Oriental dragon, also called a ryuu or long, and the Western dragon, two similar but dissimilar creatures."

"Your world? Similar but dissimilar...?"

While Naden still had a question mark over her head, the young man drew a circle around 竜.

"In my world, Western-style dragons were given this character, which is read as 'ryuu.' They're creatures that are like giant horned lizards, but with wings."

"Giant lizards, but with wings... That's about right." Naden thought it was an apt description.

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It felt good hearing the other dragons, who always called her a worm, get called big lizards. It was refreshing.

"Hm? Then what about this other ryuu?" Naden added, pointing to 龍.

"They're creatures said to have the head of a camel, the eyes of a rabbit, the ears of a cow, the antlers of a deer, the neck of a snake, the belly of a sea snake, the legs of a tiger, the talons of an eagle, and one hundred and seven koi-like scales covering their body."

That was way more bizarre than some big lizard. What kind of mystery creature was that?

"From what you're saying, they sound like total chimeras," Naden said.

"No, no... I'm talking about you here."

"..."

Me?!

That made sense. The long body, covered in scales, the front and hind legs with sharp claws, and the deer-like antlers... If you were to try describing Naden's body using animals, it might turn out that way. She didn't know what kind of creature a camel was, but did she really resemble one?

"I'm a... ryuu..." she said slowly.

"In my country, when you hear the word ryuu, the image that first comes to mind looks a lot like you," he explained. "That's probably the effect of a certain famous manga and anime, though."

"Manga? Anime?"

"Never mind, that was just me talking to myself. Don't worry about it. By the way..."

The young man suddenly slumped to the ground. He was holding his stomach for some reason.

"W-Wait, what's wrong?! Does your stomach hurt?!" Naden exclaimed.

"No, um... I'm hungry... I was dragged off before breakfast, and now that I think about it, I haven't eaten all day."

"So you're just hungry!" Naden cried, exasperated.

Bzzt! That numbing feeling came again.

In her ryuu form, she could tell. Her cheeks felt a little numb, but what really reacted were her two long, whip-like whiskers. These whiskers were Naden's most sensitive sensory organs, and the slightest breeze across them was enough to tell her what the weather would be like for the next week.

My whiskers... Were they responding to him?

Naden returned to human form and stood in front of the hunched over

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young man. His face was turned downward, so she couldn't see his expression. She reached out to touch his face softly. Her hand was close enough that she couldn't tell if she was touching him yet or not, when...

"That's a rather cute form you've changed into," the young man looked up and said when he saw Naden in her young girl form.

Naden turned bright red at being called cute. "Wh-Wh-Wh-Wh-Wh-Wh-Wh-Wh-Wh-Wha?! M-Me?!"

"Huh? You're the only one here, aren't you?"

"B-But, I'm so plain... and small."

"Really? I think you've got good material to work with. If you dressed a little better, I think you might look good on screen, you know? If you were good at singing, too, I'd almost want to recruit you as a lorelei," the young man said with a little laugh.

Though there were some unfamiliar terms, like "on screen" and "lorelei," Naden's head instantly boiled over when she realized she was being complimented on her appearance.

While Naden was still pressing her hands against her flushed cheeks, the young man hesitantly asked, "By the way..."

"Wh-What?"

"Do you have anything to eat?" A weak growling came from the young man's stomach.

...

"...Pft." Naden burst out laughing. "Ahahahahaha! What the heck...? Hahaha!"

It was a hearty guffaw. Where had all that sadness from before gone?

"You're so weird." She laughed heartily.

Then Naden transformed back into her ryuu form and picked up the young man by the scruff of his neck, like a mother cat might carry her kitten.

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Chomp... Munch, munch...

"Maybe try eating a little slower?" the ryuu girl said in exasperation, seeing me wolf down my food.

I was in the cave the ryuu girl brought me to, tearing into a hunk of meat. This den of hers looked like no more than a cave from the outside, but inside there was a bed, bookshelves lined with romance novels, and a carpet. It

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looked like a girl's room.

She had served me some sort of salted, cooked meat along with fruit. Normally, this big of a hunk of meat would have been intimidating, but I was so famished that it looked like a feast to me. I felt like how Aisha acted any time there was food in front of her. I tore into it wildly.

"Mmm," I said appreciatively. "I dunno what kind of meat this is, but it's good!"

"Oh, geez, don't talk with your mouth full," the girl on the opposite end of the table said, resting her cheeks on her palms. "You were that hungry?"

"Yeah. I'm really grateful to you. By the way, what kind of meat is this?"

"It's from a big deer I hunted in the mountains."

"Venison, huh? ...Wait, you hunted it?"

"That's how most dragons get their food, you know? We fly around the Star Dragon Mountain Range, hunting animals and gathering fruit to eat. That's how we grow into strong dragons."

"You're living a much wilder life than your room would suggest..."

While I was eating, she explained that dragons became strongly attached to their families once they were wed to a knight, but in the Star Dragon Mountain Range, they each lived on their own. There were no stores in the Star Dragon Mountain Range, and they hunted and gathered to feed themselves each day.

Also, dragons didn't gather in large groups, so they were doing well if they had one, maybe two friends. It was said that they had adopted this mentality because the majority of dragons married and left for the Nothung Dragon Knight Kingdom, so they did this to avoid having lingering regrets about leaving their homeland.

While listening to all this, I finished my meat and fruits and clapped my hands. "...Phew. That was a feast."

"It wasn't that much of a feast, though," the ryuu said.

"That's just a thing you say after a meal in my country. Oh, that reminds me. You treated me to a meal, but I haven't gotten your name yet, have I? It slipped my mind." I sat up straight, and bowed deeply to the girl across from me. "Thank you for helping me. I'm... Kazuma Souya."

I hesitated for a moment, but opted to use my fake name. If I told her I was the King of Friedonia, explaining that seemed like a hassle. Madam Tiamat's explanation had been too abstract, meaning I didn't really have a good grasp of the situation, so this was good enough for now. I didn't want to

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trouble someone who helped me if I didn't have to.

"I was invited by Madam Tiamat and came here from the Kingdom of Friedonia," I added.

"Oh, how polite of you." Hooked into it by my own bow, the young girl bobbed her head, too. "I'm Naden Delal."

"Huh? Dendera?"

"Naden Delal! Don't shorten it in a weird way!"

"Dendera the ryuu... Denderaryuu..."

What was it? I was suddenly reminded of that children's song.

"Denderaryuuba detekurubatten, denderarenken detekonken?" I asked.

"What's that weird spell-like incantation?" she exclaimed.

"Oh, it's a children's song from my country."

"Denderaryuuba" was a children's song from rural Kyushu. By the way, there was no dragon called a denderaryuu in it. "Denderaryuuba" meant "if I wanted to go out" in that region's dialect. That line of the song meant: "If I wanted to go out, I could, but I can't go out, so I won't." Or so I'd heard. Was it about being a shut-in?

"Well, anyway, nice to meet you, Dendera," I said.

"Na-de-n! Don't call me Dendera!" Naden got all huffy about it.

I reflected that she was a cute girl whose expression changed a lot.

That was how I went to the Star Dragon Mountain Range and met Dendera... er, sorry... how I met Naden Delal.

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Chapter 4: The Naden That Naden Never Knew

It was the morning after Naden and Souma had encountered one another.

In a place not far from the cave, light shone down through the branches of the trees, illuminating a small stream and a person washing themselves there. Maybe because they didn't need to worry about the eyes of others in the forest, they wore no more than their underwear, soaking in the river and pouring water over their body.

Today was another clear day in the Star Dragon Mountain Range with its everlasting spring.

In fact, rain never fell in the middle of the day here. This might have been the result of Mother Dragon exercising her power. A fixed amount of rain fell at a set time each day in Dracul. That was why, even though the skies were clear every day, the abundant nature on the plateau was able to maintain itself.

Because it was a warm day like this, the clear water of the river, which was cool, but not too cool, felt soothing. The half-naked person sat down on a rock, wiping their face with a cloth that had been left there for that purpose.

"Wh-What do you think you're doing?!" Naden exclaimed.

Naden, who had still only been half-awake, was suddenly shocked into full awareness.

"Oh, hey, Naden. You're up?"

"Don't face this way, you pervert!"

It had been Souma bathing in the river. His body, which, thanks perhaps to his personal trainer, Owen, had no excess fat on it, was exposed.

Unable to take any more of it, Naden looked away. "Wh-What are you getting naked here for?!"

"I'm still wearing my underwear, you know?"

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“That’s not the problem here!”

“Well, since I’m imposing on your hospitality, I thought it would be rude if I was too dirty, so I was washing myself...”

“Still... You can’t show yourself in front of a young maiden like that...”

With her head still turned away, Naden stole a few glances out of the corner of her eye. Even though dragons, as a race, could be somewhat ambiguous when it came to sex, seeing a member of the opposite sex was unusual, and she couldn’t help herself but look.

Without a care for Naden’s innocent reaction to him, Souma began dressing himself and asked her, “Come to think of it, when you and Madam Tiamat are in your ryuu or dragon forms, you’re so huge. But when you change into human forms you’re already wearing clothes, huh? There’s no sign of them tearing when you grow in size, either. Could it be that those clothes are a part of your body, or something like that?”

When Souma asked her about that which had been bothering him, Naden answered with a blank look on her face. “Erm... Yeah. We’re transforming our scales, so that would be one way of putting it. We can’t do anything about the color, but we can change the design, and even have them disappear entirely if we feel like it. Also, if we wash our bodies in dragon form, we can wash our human bodies and clothes at the same time.”

“Hm... Sounds convenient, but does it hurt if your clothes get torn, or something like that?”

“Do you feel pain when you cut your hair or nails, Kazuma?”

“Oh, I get it now.”

Basically, dragons didn’t have nerves running through their scales. In fact, their scales might be something like a carapace they could freely control, covering their bodies and protecting their innards.

“Hm? So, that basically means, even when a dragon is dressed up, they’re still naked...” Souma murmured.

“Don’t say another word!”

Crack, crack.

With a little crackling sound, Naden’s hair stood on end. There were blue streaks of lightning running from hair to hair. Naden’s angry mode made Souma panic a little.

“Electricity?! Whoa, hold on! I’m all wet here, you know?!”

Bzzt!

Just as Souma got away from the stream, the electric shock Naden

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unleashed struck the surface of the water. The poor fish that got caught in the discharge floated to the surface.

Souma was dumbfounded by what he'd just witnessed, but he immediately threw on the rest of his clothes and beat a hasty retreat. He couldn't take an electric shock while his body was wet.

Naden chased after him, shouting, "Hold it!"

Even as he felt terror at the crackling sound of electricity that was chasing after him, the calm part of Souma's mind was already coming up with practical applications for Naden's ability.

A ryuu that controls electricity?! The Star Dragon Mountain Range even has those? If we had electricity, there would be all sorts of things we could do with it. Wouldn't having Naden give our research into electricity a real boost?

Whenever he met someone with a special talent, the first thing Souma did was think of effective applications for their gift. It was an occupational hazard of being a king.

"Hold it, Kazuma, don't run away!"

Can I get her to come to the kingdom, with no need for a contract or partnership to be involved...?

That was what Souma wondered, even as Naden chased him around.

◇ ◇ ◇

By the will of Madam Tiamat, I was now being taken care of in Naden's cave.

That was because there were still another five days until the Contract Ceremony I had been asked to take part in occurred, and she had suggested Naden's cave as a place for me to stay. It turned out that, despite how grand the Crystal Castle was, it had little in the way of entertainment, and I would most likely just end up being bored if I stayed there.

Naden, on the other hand, had been gathering written materials from the world below, and had quite a few unusual items in her room. That, and it was probably most convenient for me to stay in a room meant for a human-sized occupant.

Though that's all starting to feel like excuses now... I noted.

Madam Tiamat seemed intent on Naden and me getting to know one another.

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When our meeting concluded, and she was about to teleport me to where Naden was so she could look after me, Madam Tiamat looked at me, her eyes full of sincerity, and said, “Please, teach that girl for me. About the her she doesn’t know.”

“Huh? What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You should already know the way. Please, offer her guidance.”

When she said that, Madam Tiamat had the look of a mother worried for her own child. Just as I was about to ask her why she had that look on her face, the scenery changed, and I was met with a black ryuu shouting, *You stupid suuuuuuuun!* in psychic speech.

After that, a formal messenger from Madam Tiamat came to Naden’s home, and Naden was appointed as my caretaker for the time that I would be staying here. Naden looked like she thought it was a pain, but she couldn’t defy an order from Madam Tiamat, so she reluctantly acquiesced.

I’d been here ever since, staying in Naden’s cave, drinking tea, and reading the materials she gathered from the lower world... Which was to say, romance novels that had been written in the nations of mankind.

Across from me was Naden, lying in bed and watching a simple receiver. A ryuu was watching the Jewel Voice Broadcast... She apparently picked it up at a flea market in the Empire, and giving it a little shock had gotten it working again. What, was it like an old TV, which would start working again if you hit it?

Naden glanced over at me and asked, “Is it any fun for a man to read romance novels aimed at women?”

“More than you might think. It shows you what the various women of the world hold up as their ideals.”

When I’d heard they were romance novels, I expected them to be messy dramas of love and hate, like a daytime soap opera, but they were light and fluffy like a novelization of a shoujo manga.

From a quick glance through, most of them were tales of chivalry. There would be a knight who swore his loyalty to a beautiful lady, and he would perform meritorious acts in service of that love... That was how a lot of them went. There were also Cinderella stories, where a simple village girl would help a young lord or prince who had left the palace in disguise, he would fall in love with her, and they would ultimately be wed. The plots could largely be divided into these two patterns.

“Is this the sort of thing you dream about?” I asked playfully.

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"...Well," Naden said, turning her head to the side in thought, "I'd like to let a cool knight ride me as we fly through the sky together."

"Ahh, if you're a ryuu or dragon, that's the sort of reading you end up with, huh..."

For a normal girl it would be, "I want to ride on a horse with a cool guy," but for the dragon races, it was apparently, "I want to be the horse, and let the knight ride on my back."

When you interacted with different cultures and races, it was interesting to see those little differences in interpretation.

"So, what are you watching over there, Naden?" I asked.

I'd heard lively noises coming from the simple receiver Naden was holding, so I was curious. She said she'd found it in the Empire, so was it a singing program from there?

"Hm? It's a music program from the Gran Chaos Empire. You want to watch it with me, Kazuma?"

"Oh! Yeah, you bet I do." I was interested in seeing what sort of music program the Empire was making.

Naden sat next to me, putting the simple receiver in a place where we could both see it. To prevent news from leaking, it wasn't possible to view broadcasts recorded with any jewels other than the ones used for broadcast meetings when you were in another country. During our post-war negotiations with the Principality and Empire, when Jeanne, Empress Maria's little sister and general, had seen our country's broadcasts, she said she'd like to imitate them back in the Empire. I wondered what kind of programs they were making.

While thinking that, I took a sip of tea, looked at the simple receiver, and...

"Hello there, everyone! This is Maria."

"Bwuh?!"

"Whoa, Kazuma?!"

I spewed the tea I'd been trying to drink everywhere. On screen, wearing an idol-style frilly dress, was the Empress Maria of the Gran Chaos Empire herself.

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“Now, I’d like you all to hear my song.”

With that, Maria began dancing lightly as she sang in a clear voice.

Though her singing and dancing might come up short when compared to our Prima Lorelei, Juna, Maria had a greater charisma that drew people to her.

...And, wait, wasn’t Maria getting really into this? She looked like she might start sparkling at any moment.

Um... What exactly was I looking at here?

Calm down, me. In everything, there’s a cause and effect.

From what Hakuya had told me, the most popular program in the Empire was the one that followed what Maria did during the day. Like on *The Imperial Family Album.* Her sister, Jeanne had been complaining, “How did it turn out like this?”

Maybe this had been the flow of things:

1. The Empire begins producing programs where loreleis sing.
2. The most popular program was one detailing the life of Madam Maria.
3. If we make Madam Maria into a lorelei, won’t viewership numbers shoot through the roof?
4. A singing, dancing empress is born! ← Where we were now.

...Well, that had probably been it, more or less. It seemed the Empire was going through a process of trial and error to find ways of entertaining their people. This one felt like an error.

Well, the program itself was fun, so I watched Maria with Naden for a while, but...

“Oh, no, there’re more of them now...”

I heard a girl’s voice coming from behind us.

When I turned back to look, there was a girl in a white one-piece dress looking at us in exasperation. The girl had goat-like horns on her head, and a white tail protruding from her rear end. Was this girl a dragon, too?

When the girl looked at me, she let out a sigh. “I thought it sounded lively in here... Naden, you finally started bringing home men, too? Make sure you take him back to wherever you found him.”

...What was I, an abandoned dog? It made me imagine myself in a cardboard box labeled, “I’m an abandoned provisional king. Please, take me home.” It made for one surreal image.

Meanwhile, Naden, who had been accused of dragging home men,

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pouted. “Don’t make me sound so bad! He’s a guest!”

“A guest?”

“That’s right! Lady Tiamat ordered me to be his caretaker.”

“His caretaker, huh... It looks to me like you two are just fooling around together, though?”

“Urgh...”

The girl was right, so Naden had nothing she could say to that. I’d been given food, and she was looking after me, but she hadn’t really done anything else as my caretaker. I’d been more or less left to my own devices.

The white girl pointed at me. “I’m Pai Long, Naden’s friend. Who are you?”

“Kazuma Souya from the Kingdom of Friedonia.”

I smiled and shook Pai’s hand. When I did, she tilted her head to the side.

“The Kingdom of Friedonia? That’s that country to the east that Naden was talking about before, isn’t it? We don’t have relations with them... What are you doing here, Kazuma?”

“Ahh, well, I was invited here by Madam Tiamat for some reason.”

“By Lady Tiamat?” At this point, Pai had a look on her face like she just realized something, and she turned to Naden. “Hey, Naden, don’t you think Lady Tiamat might be planning to have this guy take part in the Contract Ceremony?”

“Huh? Kazuma, take part in the Contract Ceremony?” Naden asked with her eyes wide. “Kazuma’s not one of the knights of Nothung, you know? Can he even take part?”

“Have you forgotten? It hasn’t happened at all recently, but they say Lady Tiamat sometimes invites those who are likely to become heroes of their time, allowing them to form independent contracts with a dragon. Like the first King of Elfrieden did.”

“A hero of our time, huh...” Naden glanced in my direction. That look on her face... She didn’t believe it one bit. “I dunno, he doesn’t look that impressive to me.”

“That’s harsh, even if it is true,” I said.

“Didn’t Lady Tiamat tell you anything, Kazuma?” Pai asked, but I shrugged my shoulders, neither confirming nor denying.

It was true, Madam Tiamat had suggested she’d like for me to participate in the Contract Ceremony. However, I hesitated to tell that to these two. If they found I would be taking part, the next question would obviously be who

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exactly I was. Having them find out I was the king of a nation would be a bit of a headache.

"I'm not at liberty to say. If you want to know, ask Madam Tiamat."

"Ahaha!" Pai laughed. "It's not that easy to get to talk with her, though. Oh, I know!" Pai clapped her hands "Naden, you're in charge of looking after Kazuma, right? It's not something that comes up often, so why not show him around the Star Dragon Mountain Range?"

"Oh! I'd be interested in that," I said. "Could I trouble you to?"

"Uh..." Naden openly acted like it would be a real pain. "The Star Dragon Mountain Range is pretty big, you know? Wouldn't that be kind of hard for Kazuma, having to walk?"

"You can carry him on your back," Pai said.

"Pai, a dragon only lets her partner ride on her back. You're well aware of that, right?"

"Where's the harm? Why not get him to contract with you?"

"I have the right to choose, too," Naden shot back. "This boring kind of guy isn't my type. I like strong guys who everyone can respect."

"...You've been getting pretty sharp-tongued toward me for a while now, haven't you?" I complained. It was like a knife being thrust into my heart... Then I realized something. "Hey, is letting someone other than your partner ride on your back seen as being unchaste somehow?"

"Yeah."

"Well, where is your back, Naden?"

"Huh?"

Naden wasn't a Western-style dragon, she was an Oriental-style ryuu. Her body was basically a cylinder going from the back of her head to her tail. While she did bulge out a bit around where her front and rear legs were, she didn't have a clearly defined back like a western-style dragon did.

"Like, if I rode right behind your head, that wouldn't be your back, it'd be the nape of your neck, right?" I asked. "How about there? There's no rule against someone other than your partner riding on your neck, now is there?"

"..."

Naden had no counter to that, so it was decided we would be going out.

Forests full of fresh growth covered more than half of Dracul. Normally, these forests were neither too dark or too bright, and due to the lack of wind, there was no rustling of branches. They were quiet forests that were not too

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damp or humid.

Now, a black ryuu was threading quickly between the gaps in those forests' trees. It was Naden in her ryuu form, of course. I was currently riding on her head.

Partly because of where I was sitting, I felt like the protagonist of this anime I'd watched a long time ago. While holding her two deer-like antlers as if they were the handles of a motorcycle, I held on for dear life and tried not to get shaken off.

We were clearly out of place in the quiet forest.

"Naden... Hold on, aren't you going a bit fast...?" I asked nervously.

"You're getting a free ride, so no complaining."

I'd spoken up because I was scared by the branches whipping by over the top of my head, but Naden didn't seem to be about to slow her pace. With the shape of Naden's body, it was like being on a roller coaster, but it was only possible to enjoy those because you had a safety bar. Well, not that I had been one for riding scream machines to begin with...

"Come to think of it, Naden, what were you saying to Pai before we went out?" I asked.

Before we left the cave, they had talked about something in hushed voices. They glanced furtively in my direction, so I wondered what was up, but she turned her head to look away.

"N-Nothing!" Then, with her head still turned away from me, Naden seemed to be muttering something. "Darn it, Pai... Who needs your, 'If you work hard to sell yourself now, maybe Kazuma will pick you at the Contract Ceremony'? Don't be such a busybody."

"Huh? Sorry," I said. "Your voice was so quiet, I couldn't make out what you were saying."

"I told you, it's nothing!"

We continued going back and forth like that while moving through the forest. Then... a few minutes later...

When we got out of the forest, I jumped down from Naden's head into a grassy meadow.

Normally, it would have been vast enough to call it a great plain, but it didn't feel that way when I looked at it. That was because, in the center of that great plain, there was a single massive tree, its roots crisscrossing the grassy field, with its branches spread out as if to cover the whole of the meadow. Thanks to this massive tree, I didn't get the sense that I was

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standing on a great plain at all.

Looking up from below, the tree rose up into the sky like a towering castle. However, its leaves were golden, and they seemed almost blinding in the way they shone in the sunlight.

I let out a sigh of admiration despite myself. “Its... pretty amazing, huh.”

“Sure is,” Naden, who had at some point returned to human form, said, puffing out her chest proudly. “This is one of the famous sites of the Star Dragon Mountain Range, the Great Tree of Ladon.”

“Radon? The atom? Or the Giant Monster of the Sky?” I asked.

“What are you talking about? It’s Ladon, the name of the dragon they say protected this tree long, long ago.”

“Hm...”

There had been a dragon called Ladon, huh? According to Naden, there was a legend that said there was a golden dragon named Ladon who lived in the branches of this tree long ago, and it was that dragon’s influence that caused the leaves to take on their golden hue.

Come to think of it, there was a dragon that guarded gold in Greek mythology, too...

Was it golden fleece and golden apples that one had been protecting? The way the leaves bunched together, it didn’t look entirely unlike golden fleece. Though it was so massive, it was more like a golden cloud instead.

“It’s like something out of the world of legend,” I murmured.

“Heh heh! It’s pretty amazing, huh?” Naden nodded in seeming satisfaction, then looked up to the tree. “This great tree has never died, never dropped its leaves, and has stood here since time immemorial. It’s like a symbol of how the Star Dragon Mountain Range is eternal and indestructible.”

“Eternal and indestructible...”

“It’s the embodiment of the dragons’ pride. You won’t find another tree this beautiful in all the world,” Naden said with confidence.

There probably wasn’t a single person out there who could fail to recognize this tree’s beauty. That was just how beautiful, elegant, and impressive this tree was. If it had been standing here forever, I could understand why the dragons would be proud of it. But...

“Calling it number one might be a bit much,” I said.

“Huh?” My reaction made Naden’s eyes go wide.

“I’ll grant you that it’s an incredible sight, but I like plum and cherry

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blossoms, too."

"Plum? Cherry?"

"They were trees in my country that had beautiful flowers. Plums would blossom while bearing the weight of the snow, and cherry trees would bloom to their fullest and then fall. They each had their own appeal, and they were quite beautiful."

"But the flowers fall, right? They only blossom for a short time. The Great Tree of Ladon will never dry up," Naden insisted.

I smiled wryly and stretched my arms wide. "Having things that stick around for a long time is important, of course. Like natural scenery, traditions, cultural heritage, and so on. But, in my country, there was an equal, or perhaps even greater, appreciation for things that move on."

I crouched down and plucked one of the cottony, dandelion-like flowers that were growing all over the place. When I gave it a shake, the seeds were carried off by the wind. The everlasting spring of Dracul helped to lend the scene a peaceful, airy quality. I smiled to Naden.

"Don't you think this is pretty in its own way?"

"But no matter how pretty it is, it's over in an instant, isn't it?" Naden protested.

"That's what lets us look forward to the next one, don't you think?" I sat down in the grass, then lay on my back. "Doesn't the fact that you can't just see it anytime you want make it all the more valuable? Even if it does end, you can wait eagerly for the day when it will come around again."

"...I don't really get it."

Hm... The dragons were a long lived race, so maybe *mono no aware*, the Japanese appreciation for the impermanence of things, was a little hard for them to understand.

"It's a difference of values, you see," I said. "There's more than one way of looking at things. It's the same with dragons, isn't it? To the Mother Dragon worshipers, dragons are sacred creatures. To the knights of Nothung, you're their partners and comrades in arms. To the Orthodox Papal State of Lunaria, you're not much different from monsters. In my former country, a ryuu like you would have been worshiped as a god that controls the weather."

"Me... a god?" Naden was taken aback for a moment, but then she burst out laughing. "Pft... Ahahahahaha!"

Naden clutched her sides as she chuckled. While I was looking at her, wondering what I said that was so funny, Naden gave me a jolly smile while

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wiping the corners of her eyes.

"Ahaha... It's all so silly. To think, they mock me by calling me a worm here, but in your country I'd become a god. So this is what you meant by a difference in values, huh."

Once she had a good, hearty laugh, Naden put on a blank expression and said in a mumble, "Would they be okay... with a dragon that can't fly?"

...Huh? She couldn't fly?

"Huh? You can't fly, Naden?" I asked.

"How could I? I don't have any wings."

"No, no, it's perfectly natural that a ryuu wouldn't have wings."

"Huh?"

"Huh?"

We looked at one another. What? There was something not meshing in our conversation...

"No, no, I have no wings, so it's obvious I can't fly."

"Is there some connection between a ryuu having no wings and one not being able to fly?" I asked.

"Huh?"

"Huh?"

There was something weird. Like there was some inconsistency in our understanding.

"Kazuma, just what are you—"

Naden was in the middle of saying something when it happened. With a great gust of wind, three dragons, red, blue, and green, descended from the skies to land in front of us.

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The three dragons that landed in front of us were red, blue, and green. They were Ruby, Sapphire, and Emerada.

Honestly... Why did I have to run into them now, of all times?

Once the three of them had taken human form, they came to stare me down at close range.

"I heard you'd picked up a human, so I came to see... Is this him?" Ruby asked.

I said nothing.

Ruby's glance shifted to Kazuma. "Weird clothes. You're not from

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Nothung?”

“...Yeah. I’m Kazuma Souya, here from Friedonia.”

Kazuma, who was a bit nonplussed at the hostile atmosphere between us, gave a cursory self-introduction.

I clicked my tongue a little. “You don’t need to give these people your name.”

“I can hear you, Naden,” Ruby snapped.

“I said it for you to hear, you nasty piece of work.”

“Who are you calling nasty? You’re just a measly worm.”

It was a touch-and-go situation. Fire spewed from her mouth and electricity sparked from my hair. Kazuma, who still didn’t understand the situation, was standing there and scratching his head.

“Uh... Do you two not get along, maybe?”

“If you thought this looks like we get along, I’d have to doubt your eyesight. The red one’s Ruby, the blue is Sapphire, and the green is Emerada. They like to call me a ‘flightless failure’ and a ‘worm,’ among other things, and they’re always picking fights with me.”

“Flightless... huh.” Kazuma crossed his arms and seemed to be thinking deeply about something.

...What had he been getting at before?

Whatever it was, I turned back to Ruby and her flunkies to tell them, “You came to see Kazuma, right? Well, how about you go home now?”

“I don’t think I appreciate your condescending tone,” Ruby sneered. “My business isn’t with you.”

With that, Ruby walked right past me to stand in front of Kazuma.

“I’ve heard... that you were invited here by Lady Tiamat, were you?”

“Hm? Yeah.” Kazuma, who appeared to be deep in thought, responded as if he’d just noticed her.

“That means you will be participating in the Contract Ceremony, yes?”

“...Well, apparently it does mean that. Not that I think I’m worthy to.”

“If Lady Tiamat saw fit to invite you, it means you’re worthy.”

I gulped. Ruby, who mocked me as a worm, was recognizing Kazuma. Could it be that Ruby was about to make a pass at Kazuma?

If Lady Tiamat had called him here, even if he didn’t look like much, he still might be a person worthy of respect. During the Contract Ceremony, it was usually the knight who proposed. However, if a dragon took a fancy to one of the knights, they could also introduce themselves to encourage the

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knight to choose them.

At the Contract Ceremony... would Kazuma end up dancing with one of the dragons?

...I don't think I'd like that.

What I imagined brought a pain to my modest chest. When I thought that the person who'd told me I was a ryuu might go on to form a contract with a dragon, my heart ached. Even though I had no intention of participating in the ceremony myself.

While I was in agony thinking about that, Ruby was closing in on Kazuma. "Hey, come stay with me at my house."

My head shot up in shock. When I looked, Ruby had extended her hand to Kazuma.

"You fascinate me. I would love to learn more about you."

"About me?" Kazuma repeated.

"Yes. You must be special for Lady Tiamat to have recognized you. If you live up to my expectations, I might even deign to form a contract with you."

A dragon knight's riding contract... Ruby couldn't have fallen in love with Kazuma at first sight, could she?

With a glance to me, Ruby added, "I am a far superior dragon than that shut-in. Unlike Naden, I can fly, and I can breathe fire, too. I could show you every corner of the Star Dragon Mountain Range from up in the sky."

"Urgh..." It frustrated me to no end that I couldn't refute what Ruby was saying.

True enough, Ruby was a red dragon, the kind that was popular with the knights. It was said that red would intimidate the enemy, so it was easier for the rider to earn military accolades. On top of that, she had the big wings I lacked, and she could breathe fire, as would be expected of any dragon. When I looked to see how Kazuma was reacting to her being so forward with him... he had a bit of a troubled smile on his face.

"Yeah, well, I'm glad you have such a high opinion of me and all..."

I gasped. Kazuma's words sent electricity coursing through my body, and my hair stood on end.

Hearing him give a positive response to Ruby, my chest filled with rage... and sadness. I didn't want to hear those words from the person who told me I was a ryuu. It made me want to cry so badly. Maybe I would let loose an electric strike on Ruby and the others, then go on a real rampage.

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“But...” Kazuma shook his head and said, “Is being able to fly and breathe fire all that valuable?”

...Huh?

“Huh? What are you saying?” Ruby demanded.

Everyone’s eyes focused on Kazuma. Kazuma scratched at his head as he replied, “Uh, well... I’m from a country without much contact with dragons, so forgive me for my ignorance here. Like you were saying before, is being able to fly and breathe fire what makes a dragon valuable?”

“Of course it is,” Ruby shot back. “While a dragon is their knight’s partner, they’re also their comrade in arms. What is sought after, more than anything, are wings that will carry them high and fast across the battlefield, and flames with which to incinerate their foes.”

“I see. Appearance doesn’t come into it, then. Well, it seems that there are a lot of beautiful people among the dragon race, after all.” Kazuma nodded at Ruby’s answer. “And you girls can all fly and breathe fire, right?”

“That’s right. Except for that worm over there, that is.”

“...I see.” Then, with a serious look on his face, Kazuma looked Ruby in the eye and asked her, “Then, tell me, what is it that makes you, personally, valuable?”

Ruby and the others’ value? Wasn’t it their ability to breathe fire and fly?

“Huh? What are you saying?” Ruby asked. She didn’t seem satisfied with that answer.

Kazuma shook his head. “It’s a given that dragons can breathe fire and that they can fly, isn’t it? Well, in that case, it’s nothing special that you can. It’s an ability that every dragon comes equipped with, and that means it’s not a special reason why I ought to choose you, right?”

When he said it that way, Ruby and the others’ jaws dropped, and they stared blankly at him. I probably had a similar look on my own face.

Kazuma continued on, paying no heed to any of us. “If other dragons can do it, too, then it doesn’t serve as a reason why I should go to the trouble of picking you, specifically. It’s valuable having something universal like that, but it’s nothing special. If you all start on the same basis, won’t the stronger or the more beautiful dragons win? Being the same as everyone else isn’t even a point in your favor.”

I couldn’t believe it. “Kazuma... You...”

Kazuma’s criticism was so on point that I started to doubt if he really had no familiarity with this country’s traditions. The fact of the matter was, the

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Contract Ceremony was an intense competition between the dragons. Since whether or not they were chosen by someone there would more or less determine the rest of their lives, that was only natural.

While we were busy reacting with surprise, Kazuma let out a sigh. “A standardized basis of evaluation, the rejection of those with individuality... I thought I’d experienced this atmosphere somewhere before, but it’s basically the same as the exam wars. Man, I had a tough time two years ago...” Kazuma murmured with a far off look in his eyes.

...Eggzam Wars? What were those? Was it a series of wars that had happened in some other country? But why was he talking about them now?

“W-Well, it’s better than not being chosen at all!” Ruby, who had come back to her senses, said with her face twitching. “Who would choose Naden, who can’t do the things that everyone else can?!”

She pointed accusingly at me.

Kazuma instantly responded, “It’s true, as a dragon, Naden lacks universality. But what she does have is individuality.”

“I-Individuality?”

“Something that makes her different from others. When evaluating the value of things, the simplest standard is ‘a thing there’s only one of in the whole world.’ If there’s only one of something, even if it’s just a child’s toy, or the lid to a jar, it only makes sense it would hold value, right? That’s equally true of people. I... No, the king of my country goes out of his way to collect those sorts of people with specific strengths.”

The king of his country... Did he mean Friedonia’s hero king?

“And you’re saying... Naden has that value?” Ruby asked, looking stunned.

“Here in the Star Dragon Mountain Range, is there any dragon other than Naden who can create lightning? She can do a thing that no one else can. That, in and of itself, is valuable. But, really, do you actually understand what’s happening here?”

“Wh-What...?”

“The reason you’re always picking fights with Naden,” Kazuma said. “It’s because you envy her for her individuality, isn’t it?”

“Wha...” Ruby seemed dumbstruck by what Kazuma had pointed out.

Huh? W-Was that really it?

With the truth being shoved in our faces, I didn’t know how to react, and neither did Sapphire or Emerada, who were standing back.

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While Ruby's mouth kept flapping open and closed, Kazuma continued to speak.

"I'd say the other dragons who hold ill will toward Naden probably do so for the same basic reason. From the perspective of those dragons, who are struggling inside a standardized system of evaluation, the existence of someone like Naden, who flouts that standard entirely to go her own way, is an object of resentment and jealousy, and thus they just can't accept her, right? During the exam wars, if there's one student in the preparatory class who says, 'I'm gonna take over the family business'... well, yeah, they're gonna stick out. Obviously, they'll have troubles in their lives that those around them don't, but for those who have been placed in a competitive situation, they don't have the composure to stop and consider that."

Kazuma seemed to be the only one satisfied with his explanation. I'd lost him somewhere along the way, too, and he was making no sense, but the one thing I did get was that he was saying I was special.

I stared at Kazuma's back. Maybe it was because we'd been born in different countries, but in these past few days, I'd been forced quite a number of times to realize that Kazuma and I saw things differently.

However, Kazuma was offering me a new set of values, most especially one where I wasn't worthless. My chest grew hot, and I felt like I might cry for a different reason than before.

"Eventually, one who knows your value will appear."

Lady Tiamat's prophecy had been true. That person was in front of me now.

"Hmph, that doesn't change the fact that a flightless dragon is of no use!" Ruby declared, seeming to have regained her footing.

A flightless dragon; those words would have greatly disturbed me before. However... strangely enough, they didn't bother me in the least now. That was because Kazuma had told me I was a ryuu, that I had individuality.

With a mystified look on his face, Kazuma tilted his head to the side. "This has been bothering me all along, but who decided Naden can't fly?"

"Huh? It should be obvious that this wingless worm can't fly."

"I mean, why would a ryuu need wings to fly?"

"Whaa?"

"Huh?"

...I felt like I had heard this exchange somewhere not so long ago.

Having gotten sick of the atmosphere here, I tugged Kazuma, who

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seemed to have a question mark floating over his head, away by the collar gently. “That’s enough... Let’s go.”

“Hm? What’s wrong, Naden? Your cheeks look awfully red.”

“Y-You’re imagining it! Come on, I was in the middle of showing you around the Star Dragon Mountain Range, remember?”

“Oh, now that you mention it, you were.”

Leaving behind the dumbfounded Ruby and the others, we turned around and went back the way we’d come.

“Naden, you better be at the Contract Ceremony!” Ruby shouted after me. “Don’t you dare run away!” She seemed to have come back to her senses.

My response was to turn back, pull down my eyelid, and stick out my tongue at her.

“So, where to next? You’ve seen Crystal Castle already, right?” I asked.

Once we’d gotten away from Ruby and the others, I had Kazuma ride me again so I could show him around the Star Dragon Mountain Range. It didn’t even feel like a hassle anymore. In fact, I even found myself wanting to keep going on like this, and to see all sorts of things with him. Not just in the Star Dragon Mountain Range, but in the world outside, too.

“I was teleported when I came in and when I left,” Kazuma said. “I’d like to see its rumored beauty from the outside, but... before that, there’s one place I’d like you to take me,” Kazuma added with a thoughtful look on his face.

“There’s somewhere you want to go?”

“Madam Tiamat said I already knew the way. If she meant what I think... it’s worth trying it, I’d say,” Kazuma said with a confident look on his face.

Ten minutes later, after racing along in my ryuu form...

“Was this place really okaaaaay?!” I shouted.

“Yeaaaaah, it’ll do fiiiiine!” he called back.

Rumble, rumble, rumble...

We were both shouting. Thanks to the endless rumbling, we couldn’t hear each other if we didn’t.

The source of the rumbling sound in front of us, with its spray of water that resulted in constant rainbows during the day, was the Great Waterfall. It was a curtain of water several dozen meters high, and several hundred meters wide, creating a mist that spread out far into the distance. Even among the

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many sights of the Star Dragon Mountain Range, which tended to be large in scale, this and the Great Tree of Ladon were in a class of their own.

Unable to remain quiet in the presence of such a sight, Kazuma shouted out, “Ohh, the scenery’s beautifuuuuul, just beautifuuuuul!”

“Huh? Whaaaaat? I couldn’t hear youuuu!”

“I said it’s beautifuuuuul! Alsoooo, there’s something I want you to tryyyyy!”

“I dunnoooo! Soooo, what is it you want me to tryyyyy?!”

“Ohhhh, I remember noooow!”

It looks too noisy, so I think that’s enough drawn out vowels from here on.

Kazuma started stripping his clothes off. It came out of nowhere, so I turned my back to him and cried, “Wh-Whoa?! Why are you suddenly stripping?!”

“To get in the water, of course.”

“Whaa?! Why?!”

“Come on, you get in, too, Naden.”

“Again, why?!”

Kazuma took off just his top, leaving his loose-fitting pants on as he started doing some light exercises, then got in the water. I tried dipping just the tips of my feet in, too. The water was being kept at the perfect temperature, neither too cool nor too warm. It felt good... But, before that.

“If we’re going to swim, there are calmer places to do it, like the lake, you know?” I said.

“It needs to be a place like this. Hurry on in, Naden.”

“Are you telling me to get naked?”

I hugged my body tightly. The idea of making my clothes disappear and getting in the water in front of Kazuma... It was so embarrassing, I thought I might die.

While I was acting shy, Kazuma laughed wryly and said, “No, no, you can do it in your dragon form, okay?”

“Oh... Th-That’s right, huh.” I blushed at having jumped to conclusions.

While I was still like that, Kazuma beckoned for me to come in. “You’re a ryuu, so you should be good at swimming, shouldn’t you?”

“I don’t know about it being because I’m a ryuu, but... I’m confident in my ability to, yes. But why is this coming up so suddenly?”

“There’s a little thing I want to try out. Okay, Naden. Let’s go to the

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bottom of the falls."

At Kazuma's urging, I turned into my ryuu form and plunged into the water with a great splash. There was a big wave that lifted Kazuma up and down. I asked the drifting Kazuma, "Why the bottom of the falls? Do you want me to train that way, or something?"

I'd heard that sort of training method existed in the world below. Was it that they tried to focus their mind while being struck by the falls? However, even if I went beneath the Great Waterfall, which would probably break a normal human's bones if they tried to train under it, with the increased mass and defensive power of my ryuu form, it probably wouldn't feel like much more than a massage.

"It'd probably help with stiff shoulders," I commented at last.

"You don't have anything that'd give you stiff... Okay, I was wrong. Please, no lightning."

"Geez!" When I raised the hairs on my back in my ryuu form, showing some electrical sparks, Kazuma put his hands up. "If you don't want to get shocked, you can just avoid saying things that'll make me angry."

"Nah... When I'm with you, I remember my female friends from back in my homeland," Kazuma said, shyly scratching his cheek. "That's why I end up making the sort of jokes I would've made back there."

"Really?" I asked.

"Yeah. The women in this world are all living their lives restrained by something, be it large or small. It could be a famous family, the need to produce an heir... For those of high enough birth, it could even be their hometowns or country. Those restraints also offer them protection, though. But, Naden, you don't have anything like that, do you? You're strong because you're a ryuu, and if you set your mind to it, you could even live alone. Freely. In all of this continent, you're probably the closest to the women from my homeland."

I didn't really get what Kazuma was saying. But...

"Even I... get lonely when I'm all by myself," I said.

The word came out naturally: Lonely. I was more surprised than anyone that I'd said it. I never really... thought that way before. I've been happy not to be involved with any dragon other than Pai, because it was less hassle that way. Yet despite that... I'd just said I was lonely.

"Well, of course," Kazuma replied with a smile. "Even if you can live on your own, it really is lonely being all by yourself."

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When I heard those words, I came to understand that I was no longer the me I had been up until now.

"The stopped gear will be forced to move."

This was what Tiamat had been talking about.

By being with Kazuma, I learned the sense of security that came from being with someone who accepted you. I learned of the loneliness that came with being all by yourself. Now that I knew those things... I couldn't go back to being alone.

I didn't want to go back.

I didn't want to go back... so I had to move forward.

"Naden?" he asked.

"I-It's nothing!"

Whew... It was a good thing I was in my black ryuu form. If I'd been in human form, Kazuma would have definitely noticed my face was bright red. Not good. I needed to get my mind on something else.

"So, uh... Oh! Right. Why are we going the bottom of the waterfall?"

"Huh? Oh. There was a thing I remembered. For now, let's just head next to the waterfall."

With Kazuma urging me onward, we went up to the mist-filled waterfall basin. That was when Kazuma pointed to the top of the falls and said, "Naden, can you swim up these falls?"

"Swim, inside these falls? They're roaring pretty loudly, you know?"

"Well, yes, it is a waterfall."

"But why?"

"There's this saying in my homeland, 'By climbing a waterfall, a ryuu ascends to the heavens.'"

"Ascends to the heavens?! Really?!"

Could I gain the ability to fly from climbing a waterfall?

He whispered, "Though the saying is actually that a carp that climbs a waterfall will become a dragon..."

"Huh? Did you say something? I couldn't hear you over the roaring of the falls."

"It was nothing. You've got to be willing to give anything a try. Let's do it."

I looked up the waterfall. "Um... I think fighting this current might break some bones..."

"You can't do it?"

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“I don’t think I can’t.”

“Oh, also, Naden, close your eyes when you’re in the water.”

“Huh? Why?”

“Trust me, just try it.”

With that said, Kazuma waved to me, as if saying, “Have a nice trip.”

“Why are you acting like this is all someone else’s problem?” I shot back.

“More like someryuu else’s problem, am I right?” he joked.

“If I do this and nothing changes, you are so getting shocked!”

Having mentally prepared myself, I moved in and out of the water repeatedly, like the sea serpents depicted in paintings. I left my body sticking out of the surface of the water in a half-doughnut shape as I charged toward the center of the Great Waterfall. When I entered the waterfall, this time I twisted my body horizontally, climbing further and further up.

“Naden, close your eyes when you’re in the water.”

Kazuma’s words from earlier came back to me.

Oh, be quiet! I just have to close them, right? Fine!

Shutting my eyes, I swam against the flow of the waterfall.

Urkh, it’s pretty scary swimming with my eyes closed...

In total darkness, I kept swimming, sensing only the water on my skin, and the sound of the falls which had been dampened somewhat underwater. My sense of which direction was up or down was growing gradually more iffy. Was I swimming upward like I was supposed to? Or were the walls already behind me, and I was swimming horizontally now?

It was probably only a few dozen seconds of actual time, but it felt like several dozen times longer than that to me. Then...

Ah!

The pressure on my body suddenly disappeared.

It was like being thrown out into space. Despite that... I was still swimming. It was like I had lost my sense of touch along with my sight. I was swimming, but I didn’t feel the water.

What was this sensation? I was uneasy, but it felt pleasant somehow.

“Hold on, how long do I need to keep my eyes closed for... Huh?”

When I opened my eyes, looking down to complain to Kazuma, the ground was far below me.

The waterfall had ended long ago. Yet I was still swimming.

I was “swimming” in the sky. I could feel the air currents clearly.

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By making my body float on them, I could swim through the sky. I was in the sky that I'd only been able to look up to before, looking down at the Star Dragon Mountain Range, the land, this world.

To think the world was this beautiful...

The tears started to flow naturally from my ryuu eyes. When the tears dried, I was awkwardly swimming in the sky, and I descended to where Kazuma was staring at me with his mouth agape.

"Kazuma... I... I could fly."

"Uh, yeah..." he said. "Though that was more like swimming than flying. The legends of my homeland said that a ryuu would climb to the heavens through wind, clouds, lightning, and rain, traveling through the sky as if they were swimming at the bottom of the sea."

"Traveling through the sky like swimming..."

"Though I didn't expect this to go as well as it did." Kazuma scratched his cheek, smiling wryly.

"Huh? You weren't confident I could fly if I climbed the waterfall, then?"

"I gave it fifty-fifty odds. I mean, if you stop to think about it, even dragons and wyverns manage to fly. Even if they do have wings, they're not built for flying the way birds are. In order for them to get those massive bodies flying, there has to be some element of magic involved. That being the case, I figured, since you're a ryuu, having or not having wings wouldn't affect your ability to fly. I thought maybe you just didn't know the way to do it. That, and Madam Tiamat said something that suggested I would know how you could fly. About the only thing that came to mind when I thought of ways for a ryuu to fly was the waterfall climbing in the legends from my homeland. That was why I had you test it."

It seemed Kazuma had been thinking of something when he'd suggested it. So Lady Tiamat said something like that to him... That pretty much guaranteed he was the person who would find the value in me that even I couldn't.

Does that mean... Kazuma is the one I've been waiting so long for?

We returned to the shore, and I asked Kazuma as he was putting the clothes that he left there back on, "Hey, Kazuma. Tell me... If I hadn't been able to fly like this, what did you plan on doing?"

Kazuma considered my question for a little while, then honestly confessed, "If it came to that, I would have apologized. 'Sorry, it didn't work

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out,' is what I'd have said."

"Wait, that's all?"

"That's all. Even if you couldn't fly, your value wouldn't change. I don't know what the dragon knights value, but going by the value system of my country, I desperately want your ability to control electricity. If no one chooses you at the Contract Ceremony, please, come to my country. You'll be welcome there."

I was silent.

"Come to my country," he said without the slightest embarrassment.

It felt like there was no place for me in the Star Dragon Mountain Range. But Kazuma said he wanted me. I felt like I could swim through the sky again in glee.

But, well... the way he said "If no one chooses you" ticked me off. So I decided to distract myself from that.

"Whoa, whoa, Naden?" I snatched Kazuma up by the collar, and forced him to ride on my *back*.

"Whoa?!"

Then, with a breath, I launched into the sky. In an instant, the ground was far away, and a panicking Kazuma clung to my back screaming,

"Naden, I'm falling! I'm falling!"

"You won't fall," I told the flustered Kazuma in an exasperated tone. "I have you on my back, after all."

"Huh...? ...Now that you mention it, we went up on a nearly vertical path, but I didn't fall off."

"It's a dragon's power. We protect the humans that ride on our backs so they won't fall off. It means the knights can ride without holding on, and they're protected from the wind and cold. Notice how it's not cold, even though we're up in the air."

"Now that you mention... I see. Little wonder dragon knights are so strong." Kazuma sounded impressed.

I giggled. "I know, right? I wasn't sure a ryuu like me would be able to use it, but..."

"Huh? If you couldn't, wouldn't I have fallen to my death?"

"I felt like I could manage it, and even if you fell, I just had to catch you."

"You know, I'd prefer not to suddenly go bungee jumping without the cord..."

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“Ahahaha. Consider it payback for earlier.”

“For the waterfall climbing?”

“For saying, ‘If no one chooses you.’ ...Hey, Kazuma?” I worked up my courage and asked Kazuma. “You’re going to participate in the Contract Ceremony, aren’t you? Won’t you choose me?”

When I asked that, Kazuma’s mouth shut tight. To form a contract meant to take me as his spouse. In other words, I was proposing to him. The reason he didn’t immediately respond was because he was giving it some serious thought, I was sure. Eventually, he slowly opened his mouth.

“I was just invited by Madam Tiamat. I’m not from the Nothung Dragon Knight Kingdom.”

“I know.”

“Even if you make a contract with me, I can’t become a dragon knight.”

“I’m not like other dragons, either.”

“Besides, I haven’t told you anything about myself. Not even my real name.”

“Huh?! Kazuma Souya was a fake name?!”

“And I already have four fiancées back in my country.”

“Four?!”

O-Oh... But, well, even the Nothung Dragon Knight Kingdom allowed polygamy. If the dragon was a partner who accompanied the dragon knight to the battle field, the knight needed another partner to stay and watch the home front, too. That was why I didn’t have any problem with the fact that he had other fiancées in and of itself, but having four of them wasn’t something he could do without being in very high standing. It was completely different from taking on a concubine after already having married his official wife.

“Kazuma... Just who are you?” I demanded.

“That, I can’t say just yet.” Kazuma managed to force those words out. “I’m not able to decide about the contract by myself, either.”

Was I... just rejected? My heart sank as I thought that, but then...

“So, would you come back to my country with me?” Kazuma asked. “You can go pretty fast in this ryuu form, I’ll bet. I’d like to go back to the Kingdom of Friedonia for a bit, and ask everyone else for their opinions on the matter. That way, if we end up returning to the Star Dragon Mountain Range, we’ll be here well before it’s time for the Contract Ceremony. Would that... be a problem for you?”

Kazuma sounded apologetic. I shook my head and told him, “...No.

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That’s fine with me.”

If it meant there was some possibility that Kazuma would form a contract with me, I’d fly to the Kingdom, the Empire, or anywhere else he wanted. I had the power to do that now.

“So, where do I head to?” I asked.

With a look of relief on his face, Kazuma responded. “Okay, to Parnam, the capital of the Kingdom of Friedonia, please.”

“Roger that.”

And with that, I swam off into the eastern sky.

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Chapter 5: Even if this Love was Prearranged

Parnam, capital of the Kingdom of Friedonia.

With the antiquated, but still impressive, castle, the orange roofs that gave the city its color, and the round city walls that encircled them, it was a city that felt, in some way, nostalgic.

However, beneath all of that were Souma's reforms to public hygiene, as well as the installation of a sewer system and transportation network, which had produced a city that was efficient and livable in a way that belied its old-fashioned appearance. This city was like a symbol of the Kingdom of Friedonia as it began to amass power.

Now, for all that Parnam was undergoing rapid advances, there were also occasionally bizarre rumors that spread inside the city. Urban legends, one might call them.

Last year brought rumors of the moving mannequin, and the kigurumi adventurer. These naturally subsided when sightings of moving mannequins came to an end, and when mentions of the kigurumi adventurer had started to bring responses of, "Oh, you mean Little Musashibo."

However, of late, a new rumor had begun to take their place.

It was...

"The Dark Shadow That Moves through the Night Sky."

This was how one metal goods seller, Mr. A, related the tale:

"I was hitting the bottle pretty hard that day, so I don't remember so well, but... I was drunk off my hind end, on my back, staring up into the sky, when something passed overhead. It was all... blackish, coiled, and long."

Here was another account from a merchant, Mr. S:

"I was comin' back from my delivery to the castle that day. It was a clear day, and ya could see the moon and clouds right clear, but for some reason,

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the area ’round me went and got real dark all of a sudden. That was when I realized there was a big ol’ shadow passin’ overhead. It was blockin’ out the moon’s light. I got right scared, and my legs gave out, but the shadow flew over top of the castle and then, poof, it vanished. Here’s hopin’ it ain’t an ill omen of things to come...”

There were many sightings such as these, and it caused uncertainty among the townsfolk who were concerned that a monster might have come. However, when Chris Tachyon broadcast the truth behind these sightings from the castle, things began to calm down.

They say the two responsible for these rumors received a harsh reprimand about it later from their guardians.

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I was now on Naden’s back, flying through the night sky. The fantastical situation of flying through the sea of clouds beneath a starry sky on a ryuu’s back made my heart dance. It got me so pumped that, without even meaning to, I started humming the opening theme to an anime I watched long ago.

Incidentally, on our route back to the kingdom, we passed over the Orthodox Papal State of Lunaria. In my former world, it may have been fair to ask if I was infringing on their airspace, but here, while civilizations may have mastered the skies, there was no concept of airspace rights. In this world, there was yet to be a system of international law that would allow other countries to take issue with wyverns and other such flying creatures being used to pass over their territory at high altitudes.

There was one clear, simple reason for that: They couldn’t enforce it.

For instance, if a wyvern entered a country’s airspace, there were no radar systems in this world with which they might detect it. It wouldn’t be possible to monitor all of their airspace, without a system like radar, using only patrols.

Because of that, such patrols were limited to the areas over major cities. This was done to prevent a small aerial force from entering their airspace to drop bombs over a city, or to drop off spies. Also, if a group was flying in formation close to the surface, they would be quickly spotted by those on the ground, and it would be possible to catch them.

So, turning that around, as long as we didn’t fly near the ground, in a formation, or over cities, it would be possible to pass over another country.

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I sent Poncho to other countries to gather cooking ingredients in the past. On those occasions, we sent messengers to those countries to secure proper permission for him to land there. However, when passing over another country at high altitude like we were doing now, there was no need to tell them about it.

That said, if anything did happen, the country in question couldn't be held accountable for it. This was a situation where we couldn't complain even if they shot us down; but Naden was flying higher than the average wyvern could, so I wasn't worried about that. That was why, when traveling from the Star Dragon Mountain Range to the Kingdom of Friedonia, we cut across the Orthodox Papal State of Lunaria.

Naden flew the route that our relaxed trip had taken nearly a week to cover in a mere two to three hours.

"Hey, Kazuma... is this really okay?" Naden asked. The closer we got to the capital, Parnam, the more worried her questions sounded. "Parnam is the capital of Friedonia, right? Flying inside their territory is one thing, but if I fly over the cities, won't it become a diplomatic issue and cause them to attack us?"

I patted Naden on the back to reassure her. "It'll be fine. I've already notified them."

"You say you've notified them, but... we've been in the air all this time!"

"It's a bit too much effort to explain, but, well, just think of it as my magic."

I had used a mannequin with the Factory Arm #1 that I'd left part of my consciousness in with Living Poltergeists so that it could do paperwork while I was away to write a message. The message said, "Be back soon. Will be riding in on a long, coiled creature. Don't be surprised." So they knew we were coming. The Factory Arm #1 was incredibly creepy to look at, but it could be used to relay messages like this, so it was still handy.

"I'm more curious how you were able to explain the situation to an entire kingdom, though..." Naden said.

I couldn't read her expression when she was in ryuu form, but Naden's voice sounded dubious.

"Well, let's just say... I'm in a position to do that," I said.

"You say you have four fiancées, too, so you're no ordinary guy, are you, Kazuma? Maybe you're really important in the kingdom? Like a major noble?"

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“I’m an ordinary guy,” I said. “One who’s been forced into an extraordinary position, that’s all.”

When I gave her an answer she could infer as much as she wished from, the city of Parnam with its lightmoss streetlamps and the moonlit Parnam Castle came into view.

I’m back, I thought.

The way that I felt, even though I’d only been gone for about half a month, was proof that this castle had already become my place to return home to.

“Naden, land in that castle’s courtyard,” I directed.

“The castle?! That’s okay?!”

“It’s fine.”

That was where people were waiting for me to come home.

Naden remained floating in the air, holding me in her mouth until she could put me down on the ground. Then she immediately took on human form herself and landed, too.

The castle courtyard was pretty large, but it was still a bit too tight a fit for Naden to land there in her ryuu form. If she tried to land that way, the royal gardeners would probably cry. We technically had a heliport-like space for wyverns to land, too, but the courtyard was closer to the inside of the castle.

When we landed in the courtyard, the guards went stiff as if they couldn’t believe what they were seeing, but they immediately saluted us and rushed inside. Not long after, Liscia, Hakuya, Juna, and Roroa came out.

When Roroa saw me, she immediately raced over and, using all of her momentum, leapt at me and gave me a flying tackle hug. “Welcome home, darlin’!”

“Urgh... I-I’m home,” I managed to say.

Roroa was light and delicate, so I hadn’t been knocked on my rear end or anything like that, but I had to spin around about one and a half times to kill her momentum. Roroa’s arms were securely fastened around my waist, and she was snuggling up against me like a cat, pressing her face into my chest.

“Darlin’, I’ve been so lonely without you.”

“Lonely?” I objected. “It’s only been about a week.”

“If I can’t see your face, whether it’s a day or a year, it’s all the same. Juna was actin’ restless, too, and while Big Sister Cia’s been feignin’ calmness, her brow was all wrinkled up.”

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“‘“Roroa!”” Liscia and Juna shouted.

While they both shouted at her for spilling the details of how they’d been while I was gone, Roroa laughed and hid behind me.

Ah... It was a bit vague, but it felt like I’d come home.

“Liscia, Juna, I’m home,” I said, smiling.

“Oh! Welcome home, Your Majesty.” Juna fixed her posture and bowed.

“Welcome home.” Liscia spoke in an exasperated tone. “You came back so suddenly, I was surprised.”

“Suddenly?” I asked. “Didn’t you get the message saying I’d be back?”

“It took too long before it came. Do you have any idea how many messenger kuis Aisha sent, worrying about your safety, Souma?”

...Oh. Now that she mentioned it, I’d left Aisha and the others behind in that village. I guess we could have picked them up on the way here, huh.

“I heard the Star Dragon Mountain Range were going to be explaining the situation to them, though,” I said.

“It’s meaningless unless you’re the one to tell them yourself,” Liscia retorted. “In the letter she sent me, Carla said that Aisha nearly took a swing at the messenger who came from there.”

“What? That’s scary...”

“Carla and the others desperately stopped her. Honestly, it almost turned into a diplomatic incident. Though it seems they acknowledged the fault was largely with them for taking you so suddenly, and then the envoy began apologizing.”

“Aisha... When it comes to me, she can be so indiscriminate,” I sighed.

Starting an all-out war with the dragons wouldn’t be funny. Show some self-restraint, please.

“It just shows how much she cares for you, doesn’t it?” Liscia retorted. “Make it up to her the next time the two of you are together.”

“Okay...”

Then I addressed Hakuya, who had been sitting out of the conversation.

“Did anything unusual happen while I was away?”

“Nothing that stood out. If you were to press me to come up with something, we gave Sir Piltory, who was dispatched to the Empire, permission to return here temporarily.”

“Piltory? Did something happen with him?”

Piltory Saracen. He was one of my retainers, and, in order to strengthen our coordination with the Gran Chaos Empire, I had dispatched him to be our

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ambassador stationed in the Empire. If Piltory has returned, did that mean something happened in the Empire?

But Hakuya shook his head with a calm look on his face. “It seems one of the wives he took to the Empire with him has gotten pregnant. He only returned temporarily to leave her with his family, who have more spare hands to look after her. Once he left his wife in their care, Sir Piltory immediately returned to the Empire.”

“That’s... wonderful news,” I said. So he’d come home because they conceived. I was glad to hear it wasn’t bad news.

If I recalled, when Piltory had gone to the Empire, he brought only his two wives and a small number of his retainers. Maybe, rather than have his wife give birth in an unfamiliar environment, Piltory felt safer leaving her back home. That seemed fair enough.

However, there was one other thing here that concerned me.

Hakuya’s expression.

Even though he was usually so calm and composed, today he looked a little bit happy.

“...Hakuya, did something good happen?” I asked cautiously.

“Hm? Nothing in particular. Why do you ask?”

“No, you just looked a little giddy.”

“...Do you think so?”

With that, Hakuya returned to his usual calm and composed demeanor. Hmm, had I imagined it? It bothered me slightly, but... Well, it was better than him scowling.

Once Hakuya was done giving me a more detailed report of the things that happened while I was away, Roroa, who was still clinging on to me and seemed sick of waiting, spoke up.

“So, darlin’, is this here the dragon girl you were sayin’ you want to form a contract with?”

When she asked me that, I realized I’d been completely neglecting Naden.

“No, I mean, yes, she’s a dragon, but not a *dragon*, per se... Wait, Naden?!”

When I looked over, Naden was frozen stiff, staring at me blankly with her jaw dropped. Like a computer that had frozen up because there was too much to process. There were probably all sorts of things going on inside her head, and her expression hadn’t changed for a while now, probably because

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her emotions couldn't keep up.

I peeled Roroa off me and waved a hand in front of Naden's face. "H-Hey, Naden?"

"Kazuma is Souma, and Souma is Yormajesty, so he's... Yormajesty Kazuma?" Naden faltered.

"I've got another weird alias now?! Hey, Naden, get it together!"

"Huh?!"

When I grabbed Naden by the shoulders and shook her while calling out to her, she finally came to her senses. Then, with an angry look on her face, Naden suddenly grabbed me by the collar.

"Hold it, Kazuma! They're calling you Souma, and Your Majesty, and what the heck is going on here?!"

"Souma... don't tell me you didn't tell her anything," Liscia said to me, clearly exasperated.

"Given my position, I didn't know if it was okay for me to give her my name or not," I said. "But... you're right. It's about time I did. Erm... Naden?"

"Y-Yeah?"

"My real name is Souma Kazuya. I'm the king of this kingdom, the Kingdom of Friedonia."

"..."

Naden's eyes went wide, and she froze stiff. I heard that when people were truly shocked, they lost the ability to speak, and it looked like that was true of ryuus, too.

If we kept talking in the courtyard at night, we were probably all going to come down with colds, so we decided to relocate to a conference room. We sat around a round table, and I gave a rough explanation of how things had gone.

How Madam Tiamat chose to have me come to the Star Dragon Mountain Range ahead of the rest.

How there was a "storm" approaching the Star Dragon Mountain Range.

How she had brought Naden and me together as a means of dealing with it.

How Naden had been the only ryuu in a group of Western-style dragons.

How Naden wanted to form a riding contract with me... Basically, everything.

Liscia and the others hadn't known what happened after I went to the

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Star Dragon Mountain Range, while Naden hadn't known about how I'd gotten there, so I ultimately ended up having to explain everything.

Roroa was the first to open her mouth after hearing everything I had to say. "Well, darn, looks like Mother Dragon's had ya dancin' in the palm of her hand all this time. It feels like your meetin' with Nadie, all of it, was prearranged by her."

"N-Nadie?" Naden's eyes went wide at the sudden nickname.

They met less than an hour ago, but she was already being treated like a friend. I was amazed, as always, by how adept at socializing Roroa was. She'll sidle up close to the other person, and not let them feel one bit of distance from her, after all.

"Well, Mother Dragon of the Star Dragon Mountain Range is known as a god of matchmaking, you know?" Liscia chimed in.

Roroa shrugged her shoulders. "Even if she is, isn't it all a little bit too spot-on? For most of the people on this continent, if you say the word 'dragon,' they imagine a big lizard with wings. I'd say Darlin' is about the only person out there who'd've been able to realize Nadie was a special and different type of dragon, a ryuu. Since she went and delivered him right to where Nadie was, I've gotta say the whole thing feels kinda contrived."

"I believe Lady Roroa is correct," Hakuya said in support of Roroa's opinion. "If I might add, it could be that Mother Dragon... Madam Tiamat... is familiar with your world to some degree. If she was certain that you'd know about ryuus, that means she must have known that the world you came from had a concept of what a ryuu is."

"Madam Tiamat... knew about the world I came from?" I asked slowly.

She'd known I was a human who came from "Earth," or from "Japan." I was sure about that. That being the case, she might have also assumed that I knew about ryuus and the legends of them climbing waterfalls. Was that why she brought Naden and me together?

"Hrm... That didn't occur to me," I said. "I should've asked more specific questions, huh."

"I think that would've been difficult," Hakuya replied. "From what you've told us, sire, if Madam Tiamat claimed not to have the 'authority' to tell you something, you wouldn't have been able to ask."

I realized he was probably right. It looked like she was doing as little as possible to influence mankind, after all. It was highly possible.

I noticed Juna was staring hard at Naden's face.

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Naden leaned back a little. “Wh-What? Is there something on my face?”

“No, I just thought your antlers resembled the ones that Grandmother has...”

“They do?”

“Yes,” said Juna. “She’s a member of what’s called the sea serpent race, but she has antlers that are smaller than yours.”

Excel, huh? If I recalled, the sea serpent race had tails and small antlers, and were similar in appearance to Naden in her human form. However, I had a theory about that.

“Excel and the other members of the sea serpent race are said to be descended from a type of sea serpent that’s also called a kouryuu or jiaolong, right?” I asked. “I think those sea serpents might have been ryuus like Naden.”

For instance, with Juna’s family, the Domas, their ancestors were said to have been loreleis. Because loreleis had a human form, it didn’t seem that out of place for them to have been descended from ryuus.

When it came to sea serpents, they were so much larger and shaped so differently, I had been somewhat dubious from the beginning about whether their mating with humans was even possible, much less whether such a mating could produce something like the sea serpent race. But if those “sea serpents” had been ryuus like Naden, all such doubts would melt away.

“The people of this world didn’t know about ryuus,” I said. “Also, Naden was so skilled at swimming that she could swim up the Great Waterfall. If they saw a ryuu who was so skilled at swimming, it wouldn’t be strange for a person in this world to think they were a sea serpent. Meanwhile, like Naden, those ryuus would’ve been able to take on human form, and so they would have been able to leave descendants in the form of the sea serpent race.”

Juna clapped her hands together as if she got it. “I see! So the sea serpent race isn’t half-dragons like the dragonewts, but half-ryuus instead.”

“Well, it’s still just a theory, though.”

“It made perfect sense to me. Then, that makes Naden like a distant relative of mine.”

“Huh? It does?” Naden asked.

When Juna smiled in response, Naden’s cheeks started to loosen for a moment, but then her gaze happened to fall on Juna’s voluptuous chest, and her smile became forced. She looked down to her own modest chest, and her shoulders slumped so hard, you couldn’t help but imagine an exaggerated

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sound effect.

"There's no way we're related..." Naden muttered dispiritedly.

"I dunno what it is, but I've got a feelin' I can get along with this girl." Roroa nodded sympathetically.

I... had some idea as to why, but I wasn't about to put my foot in that, so I didn't touch upon it.

"Anyway, what I'm concerned about now is this 'storm' that Madam Tiamat was on guard against," I said. "It seems it may not affect just the Star Dragon Mountain Range, but this country, too."

I'd turned the conversation back onto a more serious note, so everyone's sense of tension returned.

"She said you were the 'key' to dealing with that storm, right?" Liscia asked, and I nodded in affirmation.

"Yeah. If I factor in how she knew about Earth, I guess it may have something to do with how I was summoned from another world. Also, it seems she'd chosen Naden as the one to carry me."

Madam Tiamat had mentioned that she needed me, the key to dealing with it, and a girl who would carry me. It was more or less certain that the girl she meant was Naden. If there was anything I questioned about it, it would be why that girl had to be Naden in particular.

Liscia had her head cocked to the side. "It's rather vague. This 'storm' doesn't seem like a natural phenomenon, does it?"

"There's no way it is," Naden said firmly. She seemed awfully sure of it. "When I'm in my ryuu form, my whiskers are so sensitive that I can tell you what the weather in an area will be like for the next week. If a storm was coming soon, there's no way I wouldn't sense it."

"Seriously?!" I exclaimed. "That's super convenient!"

If we had Naden, we could start a weather forecast! We could start a weather corner on Chris Tachyon's news program and broadcast it around the country. In her ryuu form, Naden could probably fly around the country in a day, so if we could use that to put together even a rough weather report, it would be a big help to the people.

I *had* to have Naden come to the kingdom now!

"Souma... it's too easy to tell what you're thinking," Liscia said to me as I was getting all excited. It was apparently written all over my face.

I felt awkward about it, so I cleared my throat, then got back to the main issue at hand. "A-Anyway, in order to deal with this 'storm,' whatever it is,

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I'm sure I'll need to go back to the Star Dragon Mountain Range again."

"I don't want you sticking your neck into anything dangerous," Liscia told me with a look of concern. But I couldn't oblige her.

"If I don't stick my neck in this now, it'll be just as bad if the same calamity befalls us later as a result. Besides, I don't know if this is a problem we can put off dealing with. If I'm going to regret it later, thinking, 'Why didn't I do something back then?' then it's better to resolve the issue now, while I have Madam Tiamat's guarantee that I can."

"Well, yes... that may be true, but..."

I put a hand on the still-dissatisfied Liscia's shoulder. "Normally, I leave the things I can't do to those who can. But if there's something that only I can do, I have to be proactive about doing it. I have to set an example for the people."

"...Oh, fine, I get it." Liscia reluctantly accepted.

I stood up and walked over behind Naden's seat. Then, placing my hands on her shoulders, I said, "In order to deal with this situation, I want to form a dragon knight contract with Naden. What that basically means is that I'd be taking Naden as my fifth fiancée. Naden's not the type to be a primary queen, so she'll probably become a secondary queen, which will give her more freedom." I looked closely at Liscia, Juna, and Roroa's faces as I spoke. "But I have no intention of ignoring your feelings. If you have any objections, now is the time to raise them."

"U-Um... I look forward to working with you." Naden stood up and bowed her head.

Liscia and the other two looked at one another, but Roroa smiled wryly and threw both of her hands straight up.

"I'm abstainin'. I'll leave this one to Big Sister Cia as the first primary queen."

"That makes sense," said Juna. "I'm a secondary queen, so I'll abide by Lady Liscia's decision on this, too."

The first primary queen was in the position of having to lead the other primary and secondary queens, so this was a natural result, in some ways. Liscia, who had been entrusted with deciding for the two of them, must have understood this, too, because she let out a deep sigh.

"...Let me ask you this, Souma. This girl... you want to take her as your queen, right?"

"Yeah."

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“Is that your decision as a ruler? Or is it based on your own personal feelings?”

“For the moment, I think it’s more as a ruler.” I didn’t want to say this in front of Naden, but even if I tried to cover it up, Liscia would see right through me. So I decided to honestly tell them how I felt right now. “As a ruler, I don’t want to let such a capable person go. She’ll give me a tie to the Star Dragon Mountain Range, and by forming a contract with her, I can appeal to the authority of the first hero king. Besides, Naden’s abilities are appealing, too. Her ability to know the weather, and to manipulate electricity... both of them will allow this country to make great forward strides. I don’t want to give someone so capable to another country. I want her for our country.”

I glanced over at Naden, who had a slightly pained look on her face. I was talking about her like some sort of handy tool, so I could hardly blame her for that. I know it was weird for me to be the one saying it, but it was sickening. Still... in my position as king, I had to factor things like this into my decision-making process.

Liscia understood that, so she just nodded. “Then how do you feel about her on a personal level?”

“I have a good impression of her... but I don’t know yet,” I admitted. “We’ve only just met, after all.”

Naden hung her head.

No, I wasn’t trying to put that sort of look on her face. I wanted to make sure she listened to what I had to say until the end, so I placed a hand on Naden’s shoulder.

“But I think I can come to love her.”

Naden’s face shot up. I smiled at her.

“Unlike all of the other women in this world, Naden isn’t tied down by things like the concerns of her house, or the need to produce an heir. Even in times like these, she has the power to live all by herself if she chooses. Her free spirit reminds me of the women back in my homeland. When I was with Naden, relaxing in her cave, reading books, or watching broadcasts on her simplified receiver, it reminded me of life in my old world. If I have Naden with me, I feel like it’ll keep me from losing sight of who I once was.”

I looked Liscia straight in the eye as I spoke.

“Besides, though Naden’s birth and abilities may be special, she’s an incredibly ordinary girl.”

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“Whoa, Souma!” Naden objected.

But I hadn’t meant that in a bad way. The way she laughed, cried, dealt with her complexes, sulked, fell in love... There couldn’t have been many girls in this era who were so girly.

“I find that ordinariness charming,” I said. “So... I’m sure I can love her.”

“I see...” Liscia cast her eyes downward, looking as if she was considering something. Then, when she looked up again, she turned to Naden. “I know how Souma feels now. So... Naden, it’s your turn.”

“O-Okay!” Naden burst out.

Liscia nodded, then turned back to me. “Souma, could you give Naden and me some time alone now?”

Alone... Huh? She wanted to interview Naden privately?!

“That’s...”

“Roroa, Juna, take care of Souma,” Liscia directed.

Roroa and Juna took me firmly by the arms. I tried to shake them off, but they definitely weren’t letting go.

“Well, this’s an order from the future first primary queen, after all, so there ain’t much else we can do about it,” Roroa said.

“Hee hee,” Juna giggled. “I suppose not. We have no other choice here.”

They said they had no choice, but didn’t they kind of seem to be enjoying it?!

When I looked to Hakuya for help...

“It seems this is a family discussion, so I’ll take my leave,” was all he said before quickly leaving the room.

He ran away?!

Liscia took Naden’s hand and started to walk away from us. “Now then, Naden, it’s a bit awkward to do this here, so let’s go back to my room. Oh, but before that... How about a bath first?” Liscia added, running her fingers through Naden’s long black hair.

“Huh? A bath?”

“Your hair’s all tangled. As a girl, you need to take better care of it. Come, I’ll wash it for you.”

“Huh? We’re going together? Huh?”

Dragging Naden, who was at a total loss for what was happening, along with her, Liscia left the room. I tried to stop her, but Juna and Roroa pulled on me hard.

“No, sire, you can’t do that. It’s best to let girls work these things out

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themselves.”

“Leave this to Big Sister Cia, darlin’. You stay right here for Nadie’s sake.”

“Juna, Roroa...” I said slowly.

It seemed like everyone had Naden’s best interests in mind. I was happy to see them doing their best to accept her, even if it might have left them with complicated feelings. However, Roroa and Juna’s smiles had an intimidating edge that left no room for dispute.

“Before that, we’re gonna make you tell us what happened between you and Nadie in the Star Dragon Mountain Range, and why she likes you so darn much!” Roroa shouted.

“You won’t be getting any sleep tonight, so prepare yourself,” Juna added.

“...Go easy on me, please,” I sighed.

Sorry, Naden. Please, do your best on your end.

◇ ◇ ◇

“How is it? You’re not itchy anywhere, are you?”

“I-I’m fine...”

I’m Naden. I was currently in a bath, being washed by Lady Liscia.

S-Someone, explain this situation to me!

To calm myself down, I reviewed a little of the situation so far.

In order to form a dragon knight (or, in my case, would it be a ryuu knight?) contract with Kazuma, I had come to the Kingdom of Friedonia where he lived. But I’d been hit with the shocking revelation that Kazuma’s real name was Souma Kazuya, and he was the king (but he wasn’t crowned yet, so only provisionally).

By the time I had landed in the courtyard of Parnam Castle, which, while it obviously wasn’t as impressive as Lady Tiamat’s Crystal Castle, was still respectable, I’d been led into the castle by saluting guards. I met Lady Liscia, the foremost of Kazuma... no, Souma’s fiancées, who was therefore the future queen of this country. I was so confused I felt like I didn’t even know who I was anymore.

Then, Souma had said he wanted to take me as one of his queens.

“U-Um... I look forward to working with you.”

I’d managed to muster that much of a response, and to bow, but the

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inside of my head was utter chaos.

Huh? Was it really okay for me to marry Souma like this? I'd dreamed of marrying a knight, but Souma was a king, you know?

Sure, there were dragons out there who had married Nothung royalty. But we were talking about Friedonia, a country that had stood shoulder-to-shoulder with the Empire up until now. Was it really okay for me to become a queen there?

While my mind was still swirling...

"I know how Souma feels now. Next... Naden, it's your turn."

One of his fiancées, Lady Liscia, who they said was going to be the first primary queen, spoke to me.

She was a princess with pretty, platinum blonde hair, wearing a brilliant red military uniform. She looked to be about eighteen years old, but had a dignified air about her.

I'd stood up straight and replied, "O-Okay!"

Lady Liscia had stared right at my face, then nodded for some reason and said, "Souma, could you give Naden and me some time alone now?"

Huh? Time alone? The candidate to become first primary queen and me? Wh-What was I going to do?

Was I going to be called "You thieving cat!" like the homewrecker in that one romance novel I'd read before? No, since I was a ryuu, maybe it would be, "You thieving ryuu!" But ryuus had more of an image as protectors, so... Wait, that didn't matter right now!

"Now then, Naden, it's a bit awkward to do this here, so let's go back to my room. Oh, but before that... How about a bath first?" Lady Liscia had said, and before I knew it, I was being led off to the bath.

And that was how I'd gotten here.

I was buck naked, and an equally naked Lady Liscia was washing my hair for me. Lady Liscia's clear, white skin made even my heart race, despite being a member of the same gender. I was sitting with my legs in a "W" position, while Lady Liscia stood on her knees behind me, scrubbing my long black hair. While her chest might not have been as large as the blue-haired lady's, I could feel her very pretty swells pressing against the back of my head.

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...Yeah, I needed to say it in my head one more time...

Someone, explain this situation to me!

What in the world was going on here? I had the candidate to become Friedonia's first primary queen washing my hair for some reason.

I turned to Lady Liscia and hesitantly asked, "Um, Lady Liscia? If I may ask, why exactly are you washing me...?"

"Because your hair was a mess, that's why. You've got good material to work with, so you should pay better attention to your appearance... Well, not that I was one to talk, until recently, at least."

"I-I see..."

Pai said something similar before, hadn't she?

Then Liscia grinned. "Also, you can just call me Liscia."

"I couldn't. You're going to be the queen of this country in the future, aren't you?"

"You came here to become one, too, didn't you? Souma seems to be charmed by how normal you are, so I'd be happy if you would treat me like you would a friend. Okay, close your eyes now."

"Ah...!"

I closed my eyes when she said that, and then she poured a bucket of hot water over my head. The soap suds that were stuck to my head were washed away, and my hair clung tightly to my skin. I shook my head vigorously.

When she saw me do that, Lady Liscia... Liscia gave me a wonderful smile.

"You're like Tomoe when you do that."

"Tomoe?"

"My adopted little sister. She's an eleven-year-old mystic wolf girl, and she's just the cutest."

"Really? I might want to meet her, then..."

"If you marry Souma, she'll be like your little sister, too. Be nice to her."

While talking about things like that, we got into the tub. It was a large, round tub, and three women could have fit into it easily. While I was still feeling tense, I sunk myself into the water.

"Just so you know, this bath is exclusively for members of the king's family," Liscia, who was soaking in the water across from me, explained. "I often bathe here with Aisha, Juna, Roroa, and Tomoe."

"Family... D-Does Souma come in here with you, too, sometimes?" My heart raced at the thought.

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Liscia shook her head with a wry laugh. “Souma says, ‘We’re lucky enough to have a nice big tub in the castle, so I’d rather use that one,’ so he’s always going to the bathing area used by the castle guards. He plans his trips there around when there won’t be many people there.”

“I-I see...”

“Did you want to get in this tub with Souma, Naden?” Liscia teased.

“No! I think I’d still be a little... embarrassed...” *Burble, burble.*

Wait, what did I mean, “still”?! Hold on! I know I was the one who said it, but that was way too embarrassing!

I sank my face half way into the water. Liscia watched me with a smile.

“Naden... You wanted to form a dragon knight contract with Souma, right? That basically means you want to be his wife...”

“...Yeah.”

“What made you decide you wanted to marry Souma?”

Liscia was looking me straight in the eye. The look on her face was a gentle one, but she wouldn’t look away, and was trying to thoroughly evaluate what kind of person I was. Even if I gave her a nice-sounding answer to get into her good graces, she’d see through me in no time.

That’s why I straightened my back and answered with my honest feelings.

“Because... Souma showed me the me I had never known!” I decided to stand up in the tub, and hit her with exactly how I felt. “He taught me that I was a type of dragon called a ryuu. He taught me how to fly. He taught me what I always wanted to know, about what sort of being I am. That’s why I want to be with Souma, the one who understands me! I want to be the dragon Souma rides!”

“I heard all of that in Souma’s explanation,” Liscia said quietly. “But can you say with certainty that those feelings are your own? Madam Tiamat was the one who sent Souma to your side, wasn’t she?”

She’d hit upon a sore point. But... if I backed down here, what kind of woman would I be?

I brought my hand to my chest, then looked straight back into her eyes. “You’re right, Madam Tiamat may have arranged for Souma and me to meet. But, I can say without a doubt, my desire to be with Souma is entirely my own.”

Liscia’s eyes went wide when she heard my once-in-a-lifetime confession.

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I turned the question on Liscia. “Or what... Are you going to tell me that a love that starts out prearranged by someone else isn’t real love?”

I felt a little sad as I said it.

Liscia leaned forward hard, sinking the upper half of her body into the water with a splash. She stayed like that, with nothing more than bubbles rising to the surface. Was it about ten seconds that she stayed under? I got worried, so I called out to her.

“U-Um... Liscia?”

“Bwah!”

With a loud splash, Liscia came back up. Wh-What was that?! I sat back down in the tub, and Liscia shook the water from her hair, scratching at her cheek awkwardly.

“Sorry. Your confession there made me feel a little embarrassed myself.”

“Wha?! What are you saying, Liscia?!”

“Like I said, sorry. But you had the perfect comeback there. Is a love that starts out prearranged by someone else not real love? If you put it that way, mine was the same, and I don’t think any of the others could argue with you, either. I mean, all of our meetings were arranged in some way.”

Liscia smiled as if indulging in fond memories.

“My betrothal to Souma was something my parents just went and did without consulting me. When my father, the former king, abdicated in favor of Souma, he announced our betrothal as a way of cementing Souma’s legitimacy. It was so sudden that, at the time, I got really upset and stormed into my father’s room.”

“R-Really?”

I was surprised to learn Souma and Liscia’s relationship had started that way. Especially after seeing how deeply they trusted one another.

“It’s not just me. She’s not here right now, but the candidate to become second primary queen, Aisha, came to make a direct appeal to Souma so that he’d do something for her homeland. Juna, the one with the blue hair, was a spy sent by the current commander-in-chief of the National Defense Force, Excel, to judge whether Souma was fit to be king. Roroa, the one who talks in merchant slang, was formerly the princess of a hostile country, you know? She decided to marry Souma to force him to look after her people, who were impoverished and suffering from food scarcity.”

I was speechless. If everything she’d just said was true, not one of Souma’s fiancées had met and fallen in love with him under ordinary

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circumstances. No, I'd been reading romance novels, so I knew that the restrictions placed on people by their families could get involved in their love lives. And the view that dragons took on love, with their marriage to a knight practically already decided, wasn't much better... But still!

"And... none of you are dissatisfied?" I asked hesitantly.

Liscia grinned. "You were the one who said a love prearranged by someone else can still be real love, Naden. I think that no matter what brought us together, what's really important is the time you spend together after that."

Liscia moved over next to me. Right now, she and I were sitting so close our shoulders were almost touching.

With a gleeful look in her eye, Liscia said, "To tell you the truth, I was a little worried."

"Worried?"

"We've all overcome a lot of things together with Souma. Like getting this country back on its feet, the war with Amidonia, and the negotiations that came after. It was coming through all of that together that's forged the tight bond we have between us. We're like a family."

Family...

Liscia continued to speak. "That's why I was concerned... about whether you'd join us in that, and whether you could get used to that family atmosphere. Souma places great importance on how much we feel like a family. That's because we're the family that Souma finally found after his sole remaining relatives in his original world, his grandmother and grandfather, passed away."

I couldn't say a word. I'd been thinking of my own feelings first, but Liscia had been thinking about Souma and their family. I could see why Souma trusted her.

This is... the kind of resolve it takes to be the first primary queen, I realized.

In a show of concern for me, who had lost the ability to speak, Liscia continued in a peaceful tone. "If it seemed like you wouldn't be able to fit in to this atmosphere, I intended to oppose your contract. If you couldn't become a member of the family, I don't think that Souma or I, or even you yourself, Naden, would be happy with that. I wanted to see for myself whether you could or not, and that's why I arranged for us to be alone together."

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Liscia turned and looked me straight in the eyes.

"So, Naden, do you think you can fit in? Do you think you can think, not just of Souma, but the rest of us as family, too? If you can... we'll welcome you."

I looked at my own feelings. I didn't have Liscia's resolve yet. But... that was only true for now.

"I don't really understand this 'family' stuff," I admitted. "We dragons will protect the blood relatives of our contractors to the death, but we aren't really a race with a strong concept of family."

"I see..."

"Still, that's all the more reason why I know the loneliness of solitude. I'm a ryuu, and was even more isolated compared to the other dragons, so I understand how gratifying it is to have friends, the glee of finding someone who understands you, and Souma's desire to have someone at his side. So..." I stood up, turned to Liscia, and bowed my head to her. "Please, make me a member of your family."

While my eyes were shut tight, and I was waiting for Liscia's response, something touched my hands, which were resting on my lap. I opened my eyes to find that Liscia had taken my hand. Then, hand in hand with me, Liscia stood up, too, turning to me with a grin.

"Naden Delal, as the candidate to be Souma's first primary queen, I welcome you. Thank you for coming to this country, coming to be with Souma."

"Liscia..."

"Hee hee! The way we are now, you'd think it was the two of us who were getting married."

"Ahaha, you might be right."

We were holding hands, bare naked. What was with this arrangement?

"Oh, but you have to get permission from Aisha, who isn't here now, okay?" Liscia added.

"Urkh... I-I'll try my best."

"Well, if Souma asks her, I'm sure Aisha will be okay with it." With that said, "Mmm..." Liscia stretched herself wide. "Now, I'm feeling a little lightheaded, so maybe it's time we got out."

"Sure."

"Oh, right, Naden. If you'll come to my room, there was something I wanted you to help me with."

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“Something you want me to help you with?”

What could that mean?

Liscia had a mischievous smile on her face.

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“Phew...”

It was the next day. I was in the governmental affairs office, looking through the pile of papers Hakuya had handed me, saying, “Since you’re here anyway, please look through these important documents.” But... I was super sleepy.

Roroa and Juna put me through the wringer last night, asking me all sorts of questions about what had happened with Naden, so I was a little sleep deprived. But, well, maybe it was best to do what I could now.

It had been decided that Naden and I would return to the Star Dragon Mountain Range within the day.

I already reported back to Liscia and the others about Naden, and what Madam Tiamat had been saying about the storm bothered me, too. The plan was to pick up Aisha and the rest on our way there.

While I was working, there was a knock at the door and Liscia and Naden came in.

Seeing how Naden looked when she entered the room, I let out an impressed “Wow...”

When she noticed me staring at her, Naden glared back at me, blushing, and said, “Wh-What...?”

“Nah, I was just thinking you look real pretty now.”

“P-Pretty?!”

I thought Naden had good material to work with, but she had been unconcerned with her appearance, and her hair had been full of kinks, so it was hard to be sure of her full potential. But now that Naden was wearing her straight, long, smooth, black hair down, she had a neat and tidy beauty, like a *yamato nadeshiko,* the hypothetical ideal Japanese woman. It seemed she’d gone for a bath with Liscia after what had happened, so Liscia must have given her a good washing then.

“Yeah, I think you’re real cute.”

“Aww... Um... Thanks.” Naden managed to force out just that much as a reply. The way she was acting was so innocent and cute, too.

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...Yeah, Naden looked fine. *Naden* did.

Pressing my fingers against my temples, I looked at the other one, who was an actual problem.

“Liscia... What do you think you’re doing dressed like that?”

“This doesn’t look good on me?” Liscia turned around slowly, giving me a good look at her outfit.

“If you’re asking how that looks on you, of course you look amazing in it! But what I’m asking is why you’re wearing that sort of outfit.”

Right now, Liscia was wearing a chest plate, among other things, over the top of a shirt and pants. It was what you might call the adventurer look. In that getup, she wouldn’t have looked out of place in Juno and Dece’s party. Behind her, I could see what looked like luggage.

No matter how I looked at her, she was ready to travel. She was blatantly planning to tag along with me.

“...Liscia, I asked you to stay behind in the castle, didn’t I?”

“‘We can’t have the top guy and his number two both away for that long.’ That was your reasoning, right? I heard from Naden that you made it from the Star Dragon Mountain Range to here in about two hours, right? If we can come right back in the event of an emergency, there’s no reason I should have to hold down the fort, now is there?”

“That... might be true, yes...”

“Ahhhhh!” Roroa entered the room and shouted out loud when she saw how Liscia was dressed. “Big Sis Cia, that’s no fair! You’re clearly plannin’ to go with him!”

“I can’t condone you trying to steal a march on the rest of us, Lady Liscia.” Juna was the next to raise a complaint.

Liscia put her hands together, as if pleading for forgiveness. “Someone needs to persuade Aisha, so let me go. Naden says she’ll make trips back and forth between our destination and here, so the two of you can come later, okay?”

“Hrmph... Well, if that’s how ya say it is,” Roroa said grudgingly.

“We’ll just have to accept it...” Juna murmured.

The two of them accepted it?! Huh? She was really coming with me?

“Okay, Souma. Let’s go to the Star Dragon Mountain Range and lay our claim to Naden!”

“...”

Having gained the permission of the other two, Liscia said that to me

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with a broad grin.

Was this really okay? While I was still holding my head in my hands, Naden patted me on the shoulder to comfort me.

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Chapter 6: The Plains of Grief

In the northwest of the Kingdom of Friedonia was what would, in later years, come to be called the Plains of Grief.

It was said that the name originated with a beautiful girl who, crying for her lover who would not return, had created a pond with her tears. There was, as a matter of fact, a pond in the Plains of Grief, and the local farmers used it as a source of water for agricultural purposes. It is said that this dramatic legend of tragic love has made the heart of many a young maiden who visited this land flutter.

However, those who knew the truth behind the legend could only smile wryly.

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"Wow," Liscia said, admiring the view outside the window of the gondola.

Right now, we were up in the air. I could ride on Naden's back, but if Liscia joined me there, the ryuu's protection wouldn't cover her, and she would be exposed to the wind and cold. Because of that, Liscia and I rode in a gondola designed to be carried by wyverns, and we had Naden carry it in her ryuu form.

Naden swam through the sky far faster than a wyvern could fly. Watching the scenery race past, Liscia said somewhat excitedly, "Look, Souma. She's way faster than a wyvern."

"Gwah!" I exclaimed.

"Hold on, what's wrong?! Why are you suddenly grabbing your chest?"

"No... I only know it as a line from an old RPG, but hearing it come out of your mouth was a shock..."

"But why?!"

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Yeah, she was never going to understand why I felt so pained to hear it, and she didn't have to understand it. I hugged Liscia close as she looked at me with a perplexed look.

"Please, stay with me," I told her.

"I don't know what's gotten you so worried, but... of course I'm going to." Liscia rested her head on my shoulder. "The two of us... will be together forever."

"Liscia..."

"Heyyyyyyyyyyyyyy!" When we started getting a good atmosphere going, there was an angry roar from up top. "You make me carry you around, then you go and flirt with each other?!"

"Oh, sorry," I said. "Couldn't help myself..."

"What do you mean you couldn't help yourself?! For a start, you could ride up on my back!"

"Then the three of us couldn't talk, though."

In her ryuu form, Naden spoke using something like telepathy, so she could talk without regard for the walls of the gondola, or the sound of the wind whipping by. But if I rode on Naden's back, I couldn't talk to Liscia in the gondola.

Liscia leaned over and whispered in my ear, "You're doing this on purpose because Naden's reaction is so cute, aren't you?"

"Nah," I whispered back. "Well, maybe a little."

"You've developed a bit of a nasty streak yourself, you know that?"

"Well, being surrounded by such a difficult group of girls, I've had plenty of training."

"...Are you including me in that?"

"Come on, I told you not to leave me out of the... Huh...?" Naden's complaining cut out midway. While I was wondering why that might be, Naden suddenly added, "Hey, could you two look at the ground for a moment?"

I opened the window, and Liscia and I looked down at the ground below while flinching at the wind that rushed into the gondola.

""Wha?!""

In the fields beneath us, there were a number of big holes. Craters, big and small, had formed there. It looked like the area had been hit by a localized meteorite storm.

"It's like the area was bombarded by a wyvern unit..." Liscia whispered.

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“Bombarded?! I never heard anything about that from Hakuya!” I cried.

“Wait, Souma! This is right next to the village where Aisha and the others were waiting, isn’t it?!”

“Ah! Let’s hurry. Naden, I’m counting on you!”

“Roger that!”

Naden performed a sudden dive down to the village where Aisha and the others were waiting.

We had Naden let us off near the village and assume human form, then we went through the entrance to the village. Unlike the beaten-up fields, the village showed no sign of being any different from how it was when I was last here.

Well, what were those big holes all about, then? While I was wondering that...

Stomp, stomp, stomp, stomp. I heard the sound of heavy footfalls, and then, “Your Majestyyyyyyy!”

I saw Aisha racing toward us at an incredible speed.

With the amount of inertia she had behind her, she was almost like a runaway horse or a wild rhino, and as she got closer, I could hear alarm bells sounding in my head. This was bad. I tried to turn and run the other way, but...

“Your Majestyyyy! I finally caught youuuu!”

“Gwah!”

““Souma?!””

Without even the time to fully turn, she rapidly closed in on me, and I caught a flying tackle-hug with my side. The impact was like being run over by a small car.

...Is this going to be okay? Did she just break, like, two of my ribs?

However, my hell had only just begun.

“Why did you suddenly disappear?! That was so mean of you, deserting me like that! Let me stay with you always!” Aisha hugged me tightly through her tears.

The words she was saying were cute, and she looked like a young girl trying to get me to indulge her; but this was Aisha, the mightiest warrior in our entire country. With her strength, when she squeezed me tight, I could feel my bones creaking.

“Aisha! This isn’t just a hug anymore! It’s a bear hug!” I wailed.

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“Ohhhhh, sirrrrrrrrrrrrre!” she cried out, squeezing me even harder.

“I give, I give, I give!” I tried tapping the ground, but Aisha wasn’t about to stop.

Unable to watch us any longer, Liscia said to Naden with sigh, “...Naden, would you?”

“Can I? In their current state, I’ll end up hitting Souma, too, you know?”

“I’d say it’s partially his own fault. You have my permission.”

“...Roger that.”

With that, Naden leveled a finger at us. Huh?! What was she planning to do?!

“It’s okay, I can adjust the power level.”

“No, no, that’s not the issue...”

“Take that!” *Bzzap!*

““Gyahhh!””

Taking a hit from Naden’s electric shock, both Aisha and I ended up sprawled out on our backs.

Though I had finally been released from that bear hug, I did wish she could have saved me in a more peaceful way. Honestly... I’d gotten tackled, squeezed, crushed, and finally electrocuted. These past few minutes left me completely exhausted.

When we arrived at the inn where Aisha and the others had been staying, Tomoe welcomed me with a smile that was like a flower blooming.

“Big Brother! Thank goodness you were all right!”

I gave her a gentle pat on the head. “Sorry for worrying you. Where’s everyone else?”

Tomoe said, “About that...” glancing behind her.

Following her line of sight, I saw Hal, Kaede, and Carla passed out at a single table. The three of them had looks that seemed to say, “I’m burned out, like white ash,” with all the energy and vitality gone from their faces. Their clothes looked a little beat up, too.

“Wh-What happened...?”

“All three of them... They tried their best.”

Tomoe got a far-off look in her eye as she related what happened in the time I was gone.

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The story turns back to a few days earlier...

“Sire... Sirrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrre!”

Halbert narrowly dodged Aisha’s greatsword which she was swinging around as she cried. “Whoa! That was dangerous!”

Having cut through nothing but air, Aisha’s sword continued on to slam into the ground, leaving an indentation about five meters across. Seeing that power, Halbert’s cheeks twitched.

“Th-That’s getting into one-hit kill territory. Wasn’t this supposed to be training?”

“Stay on your toes,” Carla said, holding her sword at the ready. She was standing beside Halbert. “This is genuine combat now.”

“Oh, cripes. How did it come to this...?” Halbert said with a sigh, holding his favorite short spear in both hands. “Honestly... I’m holding a grudge for this one, Souma.”

“It’s not Master’s fault, but... I can’t say I don’t understand the feeling,” Carla agreed.

“You can say that again,” Kaede added. She was behind the two of them with both her hands on the ground. “I think I’ll be asking His Majesty Souma for hazard pay... you know!”

Crack! Crunch.

When Kaede pressed down with both hands, the ground around Aisha swelled up, forming walls to surround her. They thought that would be enough to bind her, but...

“Why, sire... Why...?” With teary eyes, Aisha swung at the walls enclosing her again and again.

Seconds later, the earthen walls came tumbling down, falling apart like a carelessly assembled pile of wooden blocks. On closer inspection, the earth had been cut into brick-sized chunks. Hard rocks and soft earth were both cut into exactly the same shape. This couldn’t have been done without a sharp edge and a frightening degree of strength.

When they saw that sight, all three of them felt their cheeks twitch.

“I like to think I’m pretty strong myself, but...” Halbert began.

“I can feel my pride as a military woman weakening,” Carla confessed. Though, I do realize I’m a maid now.”

“I’m seriously considering a strategy where we just throw Madam Aisha into the middle of an enemy army on her own,” said Kaede.

Without paying any mind to her three clearly disturbed companions,

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Aisha wailed, “Sirrrrrrrrre! Why, why did you leave me and go on by yourseeeelf?!”

“““She makes it sound like Souma/Master/His Majesty is dead!””” her three companions exclaimed.

“What am I to do now that you’ve left me behiiiiind?!”

“““No, Souma/Master/His Majesty isn’t dead, okay!”””

The three of them kept pointing that out, but Aisha wasn’t listening.

Now, as to the question of why Aisha and the other three were fighting, it had all begun the day before yesterday, when Souma ended up going to the Star Dragon Mountain Range alone. Even though the people from the Star Dragon Mountain Range had circumstances that made it inevitable, the fact was still that Souma had suddenly been abducted. Aisha, who was also Souma’s bodyguard, in addition to being the candidate to become the second primary queen, was distraught over it.

When one of the dragon priestesses in the service of Mother Dragon Tiamat had been dispatched to meet with her, Aisha tried to grab the envoy with a focused look in her eyes. Thankfully, Halbert and Carla managed to restrain her, so it hadn’t turned into a major incident.

Because the fault lay with the Star Dragon Mountain Range in this case, the dragon priestess had been apologetic, but it was a situation that could have easily developed into a diplomatic incident.

Even after receiving an explanation, Aisha was still crestfallen. She was soon so worried about Souma that her mind always seemed to be elsewhere.

When Tomoe became concerned about her, she consulted with Carla about what to do, and they decided that training would help take her mind off things.

Yes, this had started as training.

“Wahhhh... Sirrrrrre...”

Once they had gotten started, though, it turned into Aisha blowing off steam.

Aisha had always been known for her martial prowess, but it turned out she’d been holding back. Now, with her feelings let loose, and the limiter that kept her true power in check not functioning, the ground was pounded full of holes by her unrestrained prowess, and her training partners, Halbert, Kaede, and Carla, were beaten up and exhausted.

While watching Aisha cry like a child, Carla smiled dryly. “If she feels that strongly about him, Master is a lucky man.”

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“It’s a heavy love,” Halbert said, spinning his shoulders in circles to loosen up his body. “In an it’ll-crush-you-in-one-hit sort of way. Wait, don’t we get any backup? You sent a messenger kui to the castle, didn’t you?”

“It seems the best they can manage is to put up a safety cordon and keep the general populace away from this whole area,” said Kaede. “They must be relying on us to work something out on-site. They can’t let people who don’t know the situation into a place where the future second primary queen may do something to embarrass herself.”

Halbert’s shoulders slumped. “You make it all sound so easy. They don’t know the suffering we go through out in the field.”

“Whining will get us nowhere,” said Carla. “Focus on the matter at hand for now, Sir Halbert.” Though she was just as beat up as he was, Carla seemed full of life for some reason.

“Hey... Why are you so energetic?” Halbert asked.

“I can feel the warrior’s blood inside me seething for the first time in a long while. I’ve done nothing but maid work lately, so I’ve been getting close to forgetting I was once a military woman. Oh, don’t you fret. Compared to the humiliation of being forced to wear that sexy costume” (designed by the utter sadist, Serina) “and play Miss Dran” (the evil female commander who appeared in the tokusatsu program *Overman Silvan,* now airing to rave reviews all across the Kingdom of Friedonia) “in front of a Jewel Voice Broadcast crystal, this is nothing!”

“...You’ve got it hard, too, huh.”

For Halbert who had, until just recently, been forced to do descent training as part of the dratrooper unit that Souma had proposed, he couldn’t help but sympathize with another person being run ragged by their superiors.

Looking at the two of them, Kaede shrugged her shoulders in dismay. “I think that’s enough of that silly conversation, you know.”

“Don’t call it silly! This is important to us, okay?!”

“I’m telling you, now isn’t the time! If you let your guards down... you’ll wind up dead, you know.”

“Augh, geez!” Having been warned, Halbert looked at Aisha, who had her greatsword at the ready. “Whatever! Let’s do this!”

Halbert and Carla kicked off the ground, charging toward Aisha.

Halbert and Carla’s battle had only just begun.

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"...And that's how we got to where we are now," said Tomoe.

"Just how much of a rampage did she go on to leave Hal and the others in that state?" I asked.

"They tried to avoid troubling the villagers, at least, by leading her into the fields near the village and fighting there. But it was still scary, with explosions like there was a war going on."

"What, you were the one who left all those holes in the ground?" I said jokingly, with a look at Aisha, despite not having meant to. But Aisha was deliberately looking away and pretending she couldn't hear me.

When Aisha was let totally loose, she caused changes to the area's topography? I thought of her as a loyal dog before, but when she took it this far, she was more like a weapon of mass destruction.

I'll contact the castle and have them fill the indentations back in, I thought.

For the time being, we waited for Hal and the others to recover, then went up to the four-person room where they were staying. I introduced Naden to everyone.

"This is Naden Delal, a ryuu from the Star Dragon Mountain Range who I'm going to be forming a contract with. The contract is one that is premised on us getting married, so she's planned to be my second secondary queen. Naden, this dark elf warrior is my future second primary queen, Aisha. The little mystic wolf girl is my honorary little sister, Tomoe. The other three are my vassals, Halbert, Kaede, and Carla."

Carla was actually my slave, but explaining all the details behind that would be too time-consuming, so just calling her my vassal was good enough.

Naden turned to everyone and bowed her head slightly. "I'm Naden. Nice to meet all of you."

"Ohh, Madam Naden, is it? As fellow queens, let's work together to build up His Majesty." Aisha shook Naden's hand in a friendly manner.

...Huh?

"I was pretty sure you were going to be opposed to it...?" I asked.

"Hm? Why would that be?"

"No, it's just, you almost tried to kill the envoy from the Star Dragon Mountain Range, didn't you?"

"That was because they just went and took you away!" Aisha explained with a snort. "I was angry at the Star Dragon Mountain Range because they

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took my sire away from me. But Madam Naden bought me my sire back. I have every reason to be grateful to her, and none at all to be angry."

"I don't really get the basis for that reasoning..."

"People who take your food are bad people," said Aisha. "People who bring you food are good people."

"It's that simple?! And, wait, I'm like food now?!"

Well, considering how devoted Aisha was to eating food, I didn't feel bad knowing she loved me just as much. I was a bit worried that my second primary queen was becoming more and more like a puppy, though.

"So... you don't want to hog all the food to yourself, then?" Liscia asked Aisha.

What kind of question was that?!

Aisha gave her a blank look and tilted her head to the side quizzically. "Hm? Rather than hog the food to myself, won't it taste better if we all eat together as a family?"

Liscia laughed. "Ahaha! I'm glad that's the kind of person you are, Aisha."

"???"

Liscia smiled as a bunch of question marks floated over Aisha's head.

I feel bad saying this when they had such a harmonious accord going, but it was a bit chilling that I was being treated like everyone's food.

...Well, it was better than them drawing daggers at each other, at least.

While I was thinking that, Tomoe introduced herself to Naden. "I'm Big Brother and Big Sister's adopted little sister, Tomoe. It's a pleasure to meet you, Naden."

"Nice to meet you, too. You seem like a cute girl with a good head on your shoulders, just like Liscia was telling me."

"Hee hee! Am I really?"

"Yeah. It feels like a real perk, getting a cute little sister like you!"

"Eek! That tickles!"

Naden hugged Tomoe. Naden was petite, but still much larger than the eleven-year-old Tomoe, so the younger girl fit in right against her chest.

Now then, with everyone's introductions out of the way, I explained the flow of events so far to everyone who'd been left holding down the fort. I told them about the reason Madam Tiamat called me, and the storm that she (?) was worried about. That, and about how Naden was a special kind of being called a ryuu.

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“That’s my sire, always sniffing out talented individuals wherever he goes!” Aisha declared.

She’d chosen a weird thing to be impressed with. What was I? A pig sniffing for truffles...?

Anyway, once they had heard everything I had to say, Carla was the first to raise her hand.

“I understand that Liscia is able to come with us now, but the limit on the entourage you bring with you to the Star Dragon Mountain Range was five people, wasn’t it? Doesn’t that leave us with one too many?”

“Yeah... About that, I was thinking I’d leave Tomoe here in the village.”

“Wha...?” Tomoe was dumbstruck when she heard she’d be left behind.

I felt guilty seeing the look on her face, like that of a kid whose field trip just got canceled because of rain, but her safety really did have to come first.

“Now that we have the unknown element of the ‘storm’ in the Star Dragon Mountain Range, I can’t bring Tomoe with us anymore,” I explained. “Pathetic as it is, I’m in a position where I have to have others protect me. There could be a situation where they can’t protect both of us. Nothing can be allowed to happen to me, but if anything were to happen to Tomoe, I wouldn’t be able to keep a level head.”

“...I understand,” Tomoe said, being the reasonable girl that she was, but the way that her ears and tail drooped communicated her disappointment all too clearly. “I’ll wait here for you and everyone else to come back.”

I patted Tomoe on the head. “Even when this matter with the Star Dragon Mountain Range is settled, I intend to keep traveling until the number of marriage proposals I receive at the castle dies down. I want to try visiting other countries, too, and I’ll definitely bring you with me, so I’d like you to be patient for now. That’s a promise.”

“Okay... Big Brother.”

When I wrapped my pinky finger around hers to seal our promise, Tomoe’s ears and tail perked back up just a little.

Once everyone was relieved to see Tomoe taking it a little better, Liscia asked, “I understand what you’re saying, but are we just going to leave Tomoe alone in the village like this? I’m a little worried.”

“It’s okay,” I told her. “Though they haven’t shown themselves, members of the Black Cats have been deployed to this village. So she won’t be alone.”

“Really?”

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“Yeah... Inugami.”

The door to the four-person room opened, and a man wearing a black dog mask entered. This was Inugami, a member of the clandestine operations unit called the Black Cats, and the leader Kagetora’s second-in-command.

Inugami came to stand in front of me then dropped to one knee. “I have come at your behest.”

“Indeed,” I said. “While we are away in the Star Dragon Mountain Range, I want the Black Cats to look after Tomoe.”

“By your will.”

“Also, Inugami, as for you personally, instead of watching her from the shadows, I want you to stay by Tomoe’s side and give her someone to talk to. Your face is not widely known by the common people. You are permitted to remove that mask while you’re in this village.”

“...Understood.”

With that, Inugami removed the black dog mask he was wearing to reveal the face of a male beastman with a wolf’s face. When he saw that face, Hal shot up from his chair.

“Y-You! You’re Beo—”

“Mind your tongue, Officer Halbert,” he said sharply. “I am only Inugami.”

“...” Hal looked to me.

No, he could look all he wanted, but I wasn’t about to give him an explanation. The only ones familiar with Beowulf were Liscia and Hal who had been in the Army, after all.

Looking at Inugami, Tomoe tilted her head to the side. “Are you a mystic wolf, too, Mr. Inugami?”

“No, my people call themselves the gray wolf race. Because our faces aren’t human, after all.”

“But we’re both fellow wolf people, right? Let’s be friends, please.”

“You are too kind, Little Sister.” Inugami bowed his head to Tomoe.

They were a gray wolf and a mystic wolf, two races with outwardly similar appearances, and their ages were twenty years apart, so anyone looking at them would see them as a father and daughter. Despite that, they were in a weird position where the father was bowing to his daughter. Well, it looked like they’d get along, so it’d probably be fine.

With that all sorted out, I turned to the others. “Naden will be taking us to the Star Dragon Mountain Range. If we left now, we’d arrive in the middle of

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the night, so we'll be setting out first thing tomorrow morning. Plan accordingly."

"Then are we staying in this village tonight?" Kaede asked, and I nodded.

"That would be what it means, yes. Let's see, as for how we'll split up the rooms..."

"Let's get one room for two and two rooms for four," Liscia said before I could get any further. "Halbert, Kaede, Carla, and Inugami will take one room. Naden, Tomoe, and I will take another. Souma and Aisha, you take the two-person room."

"Can we?!" Hearing she'd be sharing a room with me, Aisha wore a full-face smile.

I couldn't argue with that face, so I whispered to Liscia, "Erm... Are you okay with this?"

"You had her worried sick, so be sweet to her for today, at least."

"...Okay."

I didn't know what to say. Liscia was shaping up into a lovely woman, one suited to her role as the first primary queen.

It wasn't just Liscia, I guess. Juna, Roroa, and even Aisha had each grown with every passing day since I met them, and they were all growing more attractive. I was sure Naden would probably be the same...

I needed to grow, too, to make sure they wouldn't desert me.

That night, Aisha and I ended up sleeping in the same room.

"You had her worried sick, so be sweet to her for today, at least." I remembered what Liscia had whispered to me.

...She's right, I thought. *I caused her a lot of worry this time, so today, I'm going to be really sweet to Aisha. I'll do anything I can for her, whatever she wants.*

I was prepared to do that, but...

Aisha had a surprising request.

"This is all you want? ...You're sure?" I asked.

"Yes! This is the best, sire."

So now I was sitting on the bed, while Aisha lay sideways with her head resting in my lap. In other words, this was a lap pillow. What Aisha had asked for was a lap pillow, and a head pat. Even just patting her head like she'd asked, and running my fingers through her hair, which was currently down, was enough to get Aisha's face to melt. It was kind of cute.

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With an entranced look on her face, Aisha gave me a satisfied smile. “When I was giving you a lap pillow in the wagon ride here, I thought, ‘I’d like His Majesty to do this for me, too.’ I’m very satisfied to have you doing it now.”

“...I’m getting off cheaply, huh?” I couldn’t help but smile wryly, wondering if something so simple was good enough. “I was ready to do anything for you, though. Liscia told me to be sweet to you today, so if you want to, Aisha, we could do something more... sexy...”

Oh, geez! It was embarrassing just saying it!

But given that Liscia had put us in the same room... that had probably been her intention.

If Aisha gave birth before Liscia it could result in a succession crisis, but Aisha was from a long-lived race, so it wouldn’t be that easy for her to conceive. Even if we did it here, it was practically guaranteed that she wouldn’t conceive before Liscia.

“That’s probably why Liscia put the two of us alone together, after all,” I said shyly.

Aisha chuckled. “Hee hee. That’s so like Lady Liscia. Not only does she think about the two of you, she also considers me, Madam Juna, Madam Roroa, and... was it Madam Naden? It’s strange for me to say it, but I think she’s a lovely woman.”

“...She sure is.”

“That’s why I want to be just as lovely for her. Well, of course, I’d like to have you make love to me, but if I let myself give in to desire here, I’d just be indulging in Lady Liscia’s kindness. I don’t want that.” Aisha snorted. “That’s why I’ll wait until after you and Lady Liscia have a child. In any contest, no matter who my opponent is, and even if it’s a battle for love, I want to win straight-up in a fair fight.”

Fighting fairly in a battle for love, huh. That was so like Aisha.

“I think you’re plenty lovely yourself, Aisha,” I said.

“Hee hee... You’re embarrassing me.”

Then Aisha sat up and turned over, looking at me with upturned eyes as she said, “But, sire, I’m still thinking about how I want you to make love to me, you know? When you suddenly disappeared, I felt so lonely.”

“R-Right...”

“So, please, hurry up and make a baby. As fast as you can.”

“...I’ll do my best.”

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Aisha brought her face close, pressing her lips to mine.

Come to think of it... this was my first kiss with Aisha.

While my eyes were still wide with surprise, Aisha grinned and said, “Allow me this, at least. And... when you’ve made that baby, be sure you make love to me, too, would you? Darling.”

It went without saying that that cute gesture left me as red as a boiled octopus.

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The next day...

“Now then, Your Majesty! Let’s head off to the Star Dragon Mountain Range!”

Aisha’s face was beaming as she declared that, full of energy, so Liscia and Naden gave me a knowing look.

Remembering our conversation from the day before, I felt embarrassed.

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Chapter 7: The Storm

“Hmm hmm-hmm hmm-hmm!” Naden was swimming through the sky in her ryuu form, humming to herself as she went.

I, who was riding on her back, rubbed her and asked, “Naden, are you okay? It’s not too heavy?”

“Hm? I’m totally fine, why do you ask?” Naden replied, as if this really was nothing to her.

There was a reason I was riding on Naden’s back. Because Aisha had joined the others riding in the gondola, it became overcrowded. The gondola was as big as a houseboat, and it normally would have afforded space for ten adults, but we were preparing for the “Storm,” so a good seven of those ten spots were crammed with things we brought from the kingdom.

I figured the gondola had to be pretty heavy right now. When this gondola got heavy, two to four wyverns would normally be tied together to carry it, but Naden was easily shouldering (even without shoulders?) the burden all by herself. Naden in her ryuu form was far larger than a wyvern, but was this really not heavy for her?

“Are all dragons this strong?” I asked her.

“I don’t know about the other dragons, but it doesn’t feel that heavy to me. It’s like I’m pushing a wooden board through the water, I guess?”

“Hmm...”

Did that mean she was unconsciously manipulating the gravity? Well, she was making her own massive body float, so there might be some magical effect at work.

“Hmm hmm-hmm hmm-hmm!” Naden began humming again.

“You’re in an awfully good mood.”

“Hmm hmm-hmm! Well, of course I am. This time, you’re riding on my back.”

“Does it feel different from when I’m in the gondola somehow?”

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“Oh, yes. Completely different. But... it might be hard to explain to someone from a different race. I don’t know, it just feels right. When I’m in my ryuu form, it feels like something is sitting right where it belongs, or something? Like it scratches an itch, you could say. It puts me at ease somehow.”

“Hmm...”

If that was what Naden said, she was probably right. Liscia’s favorite horse always looked so lively when Liscia was on its back, after all. I really shouldn’t be comparing my fiancée to a horse, though...

“But...” Naden added, in a concerned tone of voice, “is this okay? Bringing Liscia and the others without asking?”

She was apparently thinking about how Madam Tiamat said my companions would be invited to come later.

“Well, we don’t know what this ‘storm’ is yet, so I’d like to have my comrades at my side when something happens,” I said. “She’ll have to forgive us for not telling her in advance.”

“I guess you’re right. But, in that case, I wish we could have brought Tomoe, too.”

“Yeah... I wish we could have shown her the scenery in Dracul.”

The Great Waterfall... the Great Tree of Ladon... there were a lot of impressive sights. I very much would have liked to show them to Tomoe, who was curious about the world.

Naden suddenly said, “Huh? Souma, Liscia and the others are saying something.”

I was riding on Naden’s back, so I couldn’t overhear their conversation in the gondola. If I wanted to talk with them, I had to use Naden with her telepathy-like ability as a relay.

“What do they say?” I asked.

“Let’s see... ‘Look toward the Star Dragon Mountain Range’... they say. They’re making a fuss about something.”

“The Star Dragon Mountain Range?”

Naden was flying toward the Star Dragon Mountain Range, so I could always see it straight ahead of us. There hadn’t been anything unusual until a moment ago, but...

““Huh?!”” Our eyes went wide.

The Star Dragon Mountain Range was a chain of mountains the size of Mt. Fuji. In the middle of the sky above them, there was a single, big

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cumulus cloud.

"Isn't that over Dracul?!" Naden sounded panicked.

She was talking about the plateau where the dragons lived. When I first arrived, Madam Tiamat teleported me in, so I hadn't been able to see it, but it really was right in the middle of the Star Dragon Mountain Range. The cumulus cloud floating overhead, and the storm Madam Tiamat had prophesied... I had a bad feeling about this.

"In your forecast, there was no sign of a storm coming, was there?" I asked.

"Yeah. That, and it's strange to have just that one cloud hanging over Dracul."

"...It's probably not just a cloud. For now, let's try getting a bit closer. We're too far away here, and there's no way to tell what things look like in Dracul."

"Got it." Naden swam toward that cloud. It was visible even from a distance, but as we drew closer, its full scale became apparent.

I was shocked. "What the heck is that...?"

The cumulus cloud was conical, with a smushed, dome-like top. More than that, on closer inspection, there were many clouds gathered, moving from left to right along the surface of the cumulus cloud. Was it possible... the clouds were forming a whirling vortex?

"I've never seen a cloud like this before," Naden said.

"Yeah. I've only seen this kind of cloud in a movie."

"Mooovieeee?" she repeated the unfamiliar word.

"Just talking to myself. Anyway, it seems it's just big enough to cover Dracul."

Looking at Dracul, this cloud just covered the plateau, so it was blocking out the light and leaving it dark. It looked like some intense rain was falling, too. The winds sounded violent, so weather in Dracul had to be really rough. Even though, outside the cloud, the weather was good and clear. It was one strange cloud.

"This is a little too focused in one place to just be a localized torrential downpour," I commented.

"Why are you so calm?! There's no way it would be raining just over Dracul!"

"Haste makes waste, they say. First, we need to observe closely."

While rubbing Naden's back, I inspected the cloud. There was a lot of

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rain. At this rate, there was the risk that a large-scale disaster like what happened in the God-Protected Forest would happen here, too. The cause there had been rain that went on for a long time, but this much rain in a single place could have the same effect in a shorter amount of time if it continued.

But if we were going to come up with countermeasures... Yeah, we wouldn't be able to find out enough from the outside.

"Naden, you managed to swim up a waterfall, so rain and wind should be fine, right?" I asked.

"Y-Yeah."

"Well, then... I'm not that keen on doing it, but will you plunge into the middle of the cloud?"

"Whaaaa?!"

Naden was surprised, but it didn't feel like we were going to get anywhere just looking at it from the outside. Fortunately, there were no cracks of lightning, so it was probably best to get a look at the inside.

"It's hard to understand the situation from outside," I explained. "We'll go inside the cloud to investigate, and also make our way toward Crystal Castle at the same time. Of course, if you feel it's dangerous, pull out immediately. Tell Liscia and the others in the gondola to brace themselves."

"O-Okay."

Naden slowly moved toward the whirling clouds. After hesitating for just a moment right in front of them, she seemed to make up her mind and slowly swam in.

It was like being in a fog at first, but as we progressed, it gradually became darker. The wind and rain striking my body rapidly increased in intensity. Not one minute after entering the cloud, my body was being pounded with torrential rain and sideways winds. If it hadn't been for Naden's protection, I'd have long since been blown off.

"Naden! Are you okay?!" I spoke up, trying to remain undefeated in the face of wind and rain.

"Yeah! I don't know why, but I can see something like a flow!" Naden responded.

True, Naden was swimming through the sky, no different from how she had been before. I should have expected no less from a ryuu, said to be able to travel through wind, clouds, lightning, and rain. Even this fierce wind and rain wasn't enough to intimidate her in the least.

Normal dragons or wyverns, on the other hand, wouldn't be able to fly in

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this. That was because their big wings would be affected by the powerful wind.

Could this be... why it had to be Naden? I wondered.

Naden had to be about the only one who could fly in this. Madam Tiamat said I was the "key." Then, saying there was a being that would carry me, she arranged for me to meet Naden.

Then is this rain and wind the "storm" Madam Tiamat was worried about, after all? I wondered.

I tried looking around, but it was dark, and with the rain coming down like someone emptied a bucket overhead, it was getting in my eyes and making it impossible to see much of anything.

"Naden! Do you see anything?!" I called.

"No! It's too dark!"

It looked like Naden was in the same boat.

Then Naden shouted, "Souma! I'm all right, but Liscia and the others in the gondola may be in danger!"

We were getting pounded by this wind. There was a rattling sound, and Liscia and the others inside the gondola had to be having a scary time. The rectangular gondola wouldn't be able to cut through the wind, and if it broke midair, we'd have a huge tragedy on our hands.

"We'll need to try again later... Let's land at Crystal Castle for now!"

"Got it!" Naden began smoothly descending.

When she did...

"...n't..."

Huh?!

I was sure I'd just heard something.

"Hold on, Naden! Did you just hear something?!"

"Huh? I didn't hear anything."

"Wha... are you... goi... to do... bout... thi..."

"There! You heard it, right?!"

"You're right..." It looked like Naden had heard it this time, too. This was... a voice, maybe? I heard some words clearly.

It seemed it wasn't that way for Naden. "Yeah, but... I don't know what they're saying."

Huh? She doesn't know? Even though she can hear it?

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“There was a ‘you’ in there... Didn’t you hear it?”

“Is that what they said? I couldn’t pick it up at all.”

What was going on here? Was it possible that I’d be able to hear, while Naden wouldn’t?

Something was wrong. Besides, this voice... Something about it bothered me. It was too high to be male, but if it was a woman’s voice, something felt off about it...

“If that’s sti... not... nough...”

I heard it again. This voice... Was it coming from above?

Looking upward, I glimpsed, if only faintly, a black shadow through a gap in the clouds. With the clouds in the way, I only had a hazy view, but that shadow looked big for how far away it must have been. It may be fairly massive.

“I... ll... destroy... to have...”

Destroy what?!

Destroy. I’d heard that dangerous sounding word very clearly.

That black shadow was hidden by the clouds. Naden must have gotten out of them, because I could see the rain-drenched plateau of Dracul spread out beneath us. The static-like sound of the rain grated on my ears.

While being lashed by the rain, I looked up to the clouds we only just left. From outside Dracul they looked pure white, but from directly below they felt dark and heavy.

That voice I heard, speaking what I recognized as language... There was no questioning it.

Something was in those clouds.

In the rain, we landed in front of Crystal Castle.

Though it must have been beautiful in the light, when it was gloomy like this, the castle looked dull.

As Naden began to take human form, I jumped down off her back and rushed to the gondola. When I opened the door, wondering if Liscia and the others were all right, Liscia, Aisha, and Kaede crawled out, their faces pale. Hal and Carla followed. They all looked fine.

I rushed over to them. “A-Are you okay?”

Liscia and Aisha both leaned against me.

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“Blech... Souma, you’re too reckless,” Liscia mumbled.

“The wind shook us so much, I feel sick... Blech.”

“Oh... Er... Sorry.”

I rubbed their backs to comfort them as they vomited. Kaede had Hal and Carla looking after her.

Unlike those three, Hal and Carla seemed right as rain.

“You two are fine?” I asked.

“I was in the Air Force, and I flew on wyverns often,” said Carla.

“It beats getting dropped out of the air,” said Hal.

Carla’s Air Force experience and Hal’s dratooper training must have gotten them used to this sort of thing.

It bothered me that Hal seemed to be staring off into the distance, but... Anyway, it was probably better to get inside somewhere with a roof, rather than keep getting pounded by the rain.

“Hal and Carla, tie the gondola down so that it doesn’t get blown away!” I called. “Everyone else, we’re going inside! Naden, you lead the way!”

“Roger that!”

We went inside Crystal Castle. Once Liscia and the others calmed down, and Hal and Carla came back, I asked Naden, “I want to meet with Madam Tiamat. Where do I go to do that?”

“The great hall, I think. When there’s a crisis in Dracul, the dragons have been told to gather in Crystal Castle’s great hall.”

“Okay,” I said. “Then let’s head there.”

We decided to have Naden lead us to this great hall. It only took an instant when Madam Tiamat teleported me, but moving around in this ridiculously huge castle was a real hassle. We were all running, but it was taking a while to reach our destination.

When we reached the great hall after five minutes of running, there were two surprises waiting for us. One was that hall was so massive that “great” simply wasn’t enough of a word for it. The other was that, upon closer inspection, the great hall was actually the space I had been teleported into when I first came to the Star Dragon Mountain Range. It seemed that the great hall was the place where I met the mountainous Madam Tiamat.

When we entered the great hall, there were about a hundred people in the center. They were all sprouting horns and tails, so they were probably dragons in human form.

From what Naden told me, there were only about three hundred people

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(dragons?) living in the Star Dragon Mountain Range, at most.

Even considering their massive size, that was an incredibly low population density for a country.

Because that three hundred number also included young dragons and priestesses in the service of Madam Tiamat, that meant the hundred or so here comprised all of the grown dragons that could actually move around.

The moment we entered the great hall, we sensed something menacing in the air. In a space that could have fit tens of thousands of humans, the dragons were all gathered together in one compact area for some reason.

It sounded noisy, and no one took any notice of the people who just entered the room. It looked like Madam Tiamat wasn't here anymore, so what could have happened?

Whatever it was, we approached the group. When we did...

"Naden!" A girl in a white one-piece jumped out of the group. That was... Naden's friend... Pai, was it?

Naden caught her friend, who hugged her tight. "Pai! Thank goodness. You're safe."

Naden had a relieved look on her face, but the desperation on Pai's was undiminished.

"Naden, where have you been?! I was worried!"

"Oh, sorry. I was making a little trip to Souma's country..."

"Souma's country? Who?"

Oh! Right, I only ever told Pai my alias, huh. It looked like Naden realized that, too.

"Maybe you'll understand if I call it Kazuma's country. The Kingdom of Friedonia."

"Friedonia?! That far?! How...?"

"Ahaha, it's a long story, but..."

"Wait, we don't have time for this!"

Naden tried to explain the story so far, but Pai immediately cut her off. Pai had a serious look on her face as she clung on to the dissatisfied Naden.

"Please, Naden! Stop everyone! At this rate, Ruby's going to..."

Ruby? Ruby was... the red dragon who kept picking fights with Naden, right?

Pai explained the current situation for us.

Here, the story turns back a bit.

It turns out that mysterious cloud suddenly appeared in the skies above

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Dracul this morning.

Even though the skies had been clear up until then, that cloud suddenly appeared and brought violent wind and rain to Dracul. The heavy rainfall made the lakes overflow, and knocked down the trees.

In response, the dragons gathered in Crystal Castle.

The wind and rain seemed only to be affecting Dracul, so I would have thought they would just evacuate somewhere else, but there was a reason why they couldn't.

It was because the dragons' eggs were beneath Crystal Castle.

I already heard that when a dragon who formed a contract with a knight laid an egg, it was left in the care of the Star Dragon Mountain Range. Apparently the simple passage of time wasn't enough to make them hatch.

They were left in a place called the Cradle Room beneath Crystal Castle, and waited there for their time of awakening. That time would come only when they would be able to meet the one they were destined to form a contract with. There were cases when an egg went unhatched for close to a century, and that was one reason why they couldn't be raised by their parents.

Because the eggs couldn't be removed from the Cradle Room, the dragons had to defend this Crystal Castle, no matter what.

That was what led the dragons to investigate this bizarre cloud, but the winged dragons were buffeted by the strong winds, and none of them were able to reach the clouds.

In response to this situation, the dragons turned to Madam Tiamat for guidance.

Madam Tiamat answered, "A wingless dragon could fly through this wind and rain." Further, she added, "That one already holds the key. Until they return, I will protect my children, the eggs that await their time of awakening."

Then she took the dragon priestesses with her and went down to the Cradle Room.

The dragons left behind had gone into an uproar. It was terrifying that they were told there was nothing they could do to remedy the situation. They considered what the wingless dragon might be, and quickly thought of Naden Delal. It was well known that Naden was a unique individual who had no wings.

However, when they were about to go call Naden, Pai told them to stop. She told them that no one had been in the cave Naden used as her den for the

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last few days.

When they'd gone to check, Naden really wasn't in her cave.

Naturally. Naden had gone to the Kingdom of Friedonia with me, and this morning, we'd been in the village near the border where Aisha and the others were waiting.

And so, the dragons were astonished. Naden, who Madam Tiamat had assured them could resolve this situation, was absent.

"At first, there were some voices of discontent, saying, 'Where did she go off to at a time like this?'" Pai explained. "But because she wasn't here, it didn't really matter. Eventually, the question changed to, 'Why isn't Naden in Dracul?' From there, it occurred to them it was because of their own feelings towards Naden. Their hearts had mocked her for being a wingless dragon, a worm. 'Maybe she got tired of being called a worm, and that's why she left the Star Dragon Mountain Range?' they started to think. And then they turned on Ruby and her friends."

Everyone knew Ruby often messed with Naden, and it often led to fights between them. So the dragons all condemned Ruby and her friends. That was the cause of the current commotion.

Pai clung to Naden and said, "Ruby's the emotional sort who doesn't think things through well enough, and she's prideful, so she said she'd take responsibility for Sapphire and Emerada's actions, as well. I was mad about all the things she'd said before, too, but seeing everyone gang up on her like this... I just feel so bad for her..."

"Don't give me this," Naden said in a pained voice.

When I looked over at her, Naden's hair was sparking with electricity as it stood on end. It was like a visualization of Naden's anger and indignation.

Naden left the sobbing Pai to me, then headed for where the dragons were gathered, her face a mask of anger.

"They're all so selfish!"

"Naden..." a dragon gasped.

For a moment, I thought I should stop her. Naden wasn't the one being crucified right now. If anything, she became the key person to resolving this situation, so she was going to get a certain degree of respect in the Star Dragon Mountain Range. There was no reason for her to pick a fight with the dragons here and worsen her position. But... I didn't want to see Naden make a clever decision like that.

So I told her, "You should do what you want. Even if the dragons don't

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like it, your place is in the Kingdom of Friedonia... in our home now."

"You said you want to be part of the family, Naden," Liscia confirmed. "Then there's only one place for you to come back to."

"The family always comes back to the warm place they call home, after all," Aisha added, with a charming wink.

"Souma, Liscia, Aisha..."

"So go give them what for, Naden!" I cried.

"Roger that!"

Naden wiped the corners of her eyes, then took on her ryuu form, opened her mouth wide, and roared as loud as she could.

Roaaaaaaaaaaaaaaar!

Naden's roar was so loud it shook the great hall, causing all eyes to gather on her. Then, as all the dragons watched, Naden flew up into the air.

"No way... Naden's flying..." Pai covered her gaping mouth with her hands. The other dragons looked like they couldn't believe what they were seeing, either.

Naden's body coiled elegantly in front of their eyes.

As Pai looked up in dumb shock, she shed a single tear. "I see... That's why Lady Tiamat... Good for you, Naden..."

Having said that, Pai wiped her eyes and smiled as she cried. She must have been concerned for her all this time. Naden had a good friend.

When Naden occupied the space above all the dragons, she cried out, "Enoooooooooooooough!"

Crackle, crackle!

She brought down lightning where the dragons were standing. There were screams here and there, and dragons fell one after another.

...Was she holding back at all? That was a nasty sound... I smelled something burning, too. W-Well, these were dragons. Maybe they'd be fine with a shock like this... Or so I thought, but the strained look on Pai's face told me that, even by dragon standards, she'd overdone it. Naden must have felt just that unable to hold back.

The commotion came to a halt, and Naden landed in the center of the gathering, where no one was left standing, in her human form. Then Naden looked down at something lying at her feet.

That was... Ruby? Her hair was a mess, the corners of her mouth were cut, and the clothing that was made of her scales was damaged. In short, she was beaten up. It was clear she was subject to an intense lynching.

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Naden glanced once at Ruby, then turned back and started shouting again. “Give me a break! I never liked the way Ruby picked fights with me, but are you people who were insulting me behind my back any better?! So, what?! Now that it’s not convenient for you anymore, you’re gonna push all the blame off on Ruby and string her up?! Are you stupid?!”

It was like a dam had broken. The emotions that had built up inside Naden all this time gushed forth. The dark, black feelings she kept bottled up inside her, unable to speak them.

“W-We just...”

There were dragons who tried to talk back, but they were ultimately silenced by Naden’s tirade.

“It’s a little late for that! You mock me all this time as a worm, a flightless dragon, and now you want to push all your troubles onto me?! You’ve got wings, don’t you?! You’re better than me, right?! Then how about you go and do something about this yourselves!”

“Naden...” With a sad tone in her voice, Pai started walking over toward her friend, but I stopped her. Now was the time for Naden to let it all out. I felt... it was something Naden needed to do to move on with her life.

“You made all sorts of fun at me! Now that there’s something only I can do, you’re gonna turn around and ask me for a favor? Don’t give me that! Listen, I hate the atmosphere here in the Star Dragon Mountain Range! With the exception of Pai and Lady Tiamat, I hate the dragons, too! Why should I have to do anything for you?! I don’t care one bit if this place gets wrecked!”

Naden glared at the dragons who were at a loss for words, and stomped her feet.

“You talked about me behind my back all the time! ‘She’s a worm,’ ‘She ought to learn her place,’ and more! What gives you the right to come to me for anything? And what *is* my place, anyway? Maybe you want to try putting your heads down on the ground and begging? Maybe it’ll change my mind?”

Ah... She’d spewed too much bile, and now she’d gotten into a weird mood. Naden probably didn’t even realize what she was saying anymore. Sheesh...

“Come on, we have to hurry...” Pai said.

“Okay, let’s leave it at that.”

I put a hand on Naden’s shoulder and stopped her.

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Souma grabbed my shoulder with a serious look on his face. “I think you’ve said enough. If you go any further, you’ll just be devaluing yourself, Naden.”

What? Don’t get in my way. I brushed off Souma’s hand, then angrily rounded on him.

“Huh?! What’s my value, anyway?! That I can fly, even without wings?”

“No.”

“My value is that I can fly in the storm? ‘So go fly,’ is that it?”

“No.”

“Well, what is it supposed to be, then?!”

“Your heart isn’t fixated on the value of things. That’s what makes you valuable, Naden!”

Souma placed his hands on my shoulders again, and said that firmly. He was gripping me tightly, so it kind of hurt. That pain... brought me back to my senses.

“Your ability to see the good in things, no matter what anyone else says about them; that’s your charm, Naden! If it’s fun, you’ll read romance novels from the world outside, and even watch Jewel Voice Broadcasts from the Empire. You’re even able to get along with a foreigner like me, who suddenly showed up out of nowhere, like it’s no big deal. You don’t care what other people think. You do what you want to do. That ordinary, free spirit of yours is what I love about you. It wasn’t any other dragon that I decided I wanted to form a contract with, it was you, Naden!”

I fell silent.

Hearing him say he loved me made my head rapidly cool. No, the opposite. It boiled over. My face was hot. My mouth bobbed open and closed like a fish gasping for air, and no words came out.

Souma kept going as if it didn’t matter. “If you go trampling on other people’s personalities just because your positions have changed, you’ll become what you hate most. I don’t want to see you end up like that.”

“S-Souma...”

“Besides, there’s no need for you to endure things on your own anymore.”

The next thing I noticed, Liscia and Aisha were at our side, too.

“Naden, you’re a part of the family now, so rely on us when you need to,” Liscia said.

“Indeed,” Aisha agreed. “I’m not smart like His Majesty and the others,

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so I do my best with my combat abilities. If anyone ever hurts you, Madam Naden, let me cut them down with this blade."

Liscia had a wry smile on her face, and Aisha was saying dangerous things with a hearty laugh.

Oh... I get it. I had so many people now, not just Pai, who would see my pain as their own. I was sure I would see their pain as my pain, too.

I turned to Souma and the others with a bow. "Sorry. I was kind of getting riled up there."

"Haha, well, I'm sure you've got to get it out of your system once in a while," he said. "Besides, we were mad, too. Let's twist the knife a bit."

With that, Souma went to stand in front of the dragons who were watching at a distance. Huh? What was he planning to do?

"I am King Souma Kazuya of the Kingdom of Friedonia," Souma suddenly named himself.

There was a buzz from the dragons.

"D-Did he say king...?!"

"And of Friedonia?! That big country to the east?!"

It was surprising that humans had come here before the Contract Ceremony, but on top of that, he said he wasn't from the Nothung Dragon Knight Kingdom, but was the King of Friedonia.

Even Pai, who knew Souma, cried out, "Wait, Kazuma is Souma? And a king, too?" blinking in surprise.

In a kingly voice, Souma continued. "On this occasion, I, Souma Kazuya, have come to form a contract with Naden under the guidance of Madam Tiamat. This is also a means of dealing with the 'storm.' In other words, Naden Delal will be becoming one of the queens of Friedonia." Souma stared down at the dragons. "So, if any of you mess with Naden after this, be ready for it to become a diplomatic incident."

When he intimidated the dragons like that, Souma looked less like the king of a country, and more like a demon king. He said he'd twist the knife, but this was too big to be a knife. It was like a stake, and he was pounding it through them, into the ground, to make sure they stayed there and got the point. As proof of that, the dragons were frozen stiff, unable to say a word.

In truth, he was just a frail human who they could have blown away with a mere breath, but Souma dominated the room. It gave me a new sense of how big the country was that Souma carried on his shoulders.

But Souma didn't normally act like he wanted to use that sort of

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authority. I mean, he even went by a fake name when we first met. If Souma was relying on his authority to intimidate them... was he really, really mad?

On my behalf, because they mocked me... No, maybe I'm being too conceited.

While I was thinking about him like that, I saw Ruby, beaten up and lying on her side, out of the corner of my eye. I slowly walked over to her.

I looked down at Ruby, who was lying on the ground, her breathing ragged. It was the opposite of all those times she looked down at me from the sky.

I asked her a question.

"You awake, stupid Ruby?"

"Yes, I'm awake, dumb Naden."

Beaten up or not, it seemed she was still in good enough shape to respond to attitude with attitude. Even in this state, Ruby was Ruby. Maybe because I just vented, I had no spite left for her. I ought to still have plenty to complain about with her, but I just didn't care right now.

"I'd say the dragons overdid it, but you deserved half of this," I told her.

"Hmph...!"

"I mean, couldn't you have gotten off with less than this? Like, if you said I ran away."

"If I did that... I'd be the same as them," Ruby said indignantly. "All they ever do is talk about people behind their backs. I don't want to be like that. If I think something, I'm going to say it right to your face."

"That's been nothing but a nuisance for me," I snapped.

Well, since it gave me someone I could actually fight, it might have been better than the other dragons who kept their comments behind my back. When I got mad, I was able to hit her with an electric shock, after all. If she kept it quiet, I wouldn't have been able to do that.

Ruby let out a little sigh. "...You've got it so good. You look like that, but you could still fly. And you're marrying a king? Just how special are you? I couldn't be more jealous."

Jealous... It looked like what Souma said was true. Even so, I didn't know how to react to that. After all...

"So many times, I wished I could have been born an ordinary dragon like you, Ruby."

If I'd been an ordinary dragon, I would have never been put through any of that. If I'd been normal like Ruby. But Ruby now said she envied how I

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was special.

Ordinary and special. If only our positions were reversed... But it probably wasn't that simple. If I was ordinary, I'd have wanted to be special, and if Ruby was special, she'd have wanted to be ordinary. People longed to be the things they weren't, after all.

"Naden... Things just didn't go well for either of us," Ruby said.

"That's life, Ruby."

We both smiled wryly.

Honestly... things never went well.

"Naden, come with us," Souma called to me. It looked like it was time to plan out how we'd deal with the storm.

"They're calling me," I told Ruby.

"Yeah, yeah. Go wherever you want. Whether it's to the clouds, or to the kingdom."

Leaving Ruby behind me with her usual spite, I ran over to Souma.

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Oh, geez... This is the worst... I thought miserably.

My whole body ached. Still beaten and blue, I lay on my back looking upward.

I, Ruby, had been rebuked for picking fights with Naden, and the dragons all ganged up to attack me. Even as dragons went, I felt like I was pretty strong, but the odds were too stacked against me.

The dragons attacking me said horrible things about Naden behind her back, but now that they needed her power, they turned around and condemned me.

"You deserved half of this." Naden's words from earlier came back to mind.

Yeesh, I know that, okay?

Naden's husband-to-be was right. I was jealous of her. I'd always been jealous of Naden, who was born special, in the Star Dragon Mountain Range, a place where our system of values was stiff and inflexible and individuality tended to get buried. I wanted something special, something the other dragons didn't have, like Naden...

"So many times, I wished I could have been born an ordinary dragon like you, Ruby."

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Things really don't work out the way you want them to. In the end, we were both just wishing for what we didn't have.

I looked up to the ceiling that was so high I couldn't see it. The tears from the corners of my eyes streamed toward my ears. *Oh, geez, where did I go wrong...?*

"Yeah, I can't just see this as someone else's problem." Suddenly, there was a voice from above my head. When I looked up, a well-muscled young man with red hair was looking down at me. "When I see how you messed up, got beaten black and blue, and left lying here, it reminds me of how I was, not so long ago. I messed up with Souma, too, and my old man gave me a thrashing for it."

While he said that, the red-haired young man scratched his head. Then, crouching down to take a look at my face as I lay facing upward, he laughed.

"Ah... This may be none of my business, but one piece of advice: You can't change the fact you screwed up. There's no undoing it."

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I was silent.

"So, how are you going to make up for it? There's stuff in this world you can't make up for, sure. But if you can, you'll want to do that, so you can puff your chest out with pride, right?"

Make up for it, and puff my chest out with pride...

"Make it up to the person I wronged, you mean?" I asked.

"No. To yourself."

Make up for what I did wrong. So that I can approach myself with pride. I didn't know why, but for some reason, I found myself easily accepting this young man's words. Then...

"What are you acting so important for, Hal?" a fox-eyed girl asked.

"Wha, Kaede?! Where's the harm? I'm just showing some compassion here!"

"Hmm..."

The fox-eared girl looked at him coldly, and the red haired young man began desperately trying to explain himself. He looked a little cool until just now, but his panic ruined it.

Sometimes he was cool, and sometimes he was goofy... He was interesting to watch. And besides...

"You'll want to do that, so you can puff your chest out with pride, right?"

"To yourself."

I felt like this young man's words had given me direction. I got my aching body up.

"Ah! Hey, are you sure you should be getting up?" the young man asked.

"If it hurts, you can stay lying down, you know?" the fox-eared girl said.

True, my body hurt all over, but... If I just lay here, I wouldn't be able to puff up my chest with pride for my own sake. So I turned to the red-haired young man, the one the fox-eared girl had called Hal. I turned to Hal and bowed my head deeply as I said, "I'd like to ask you a favor."

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Now then, with the dragons put firmly on notice about Naden, it was time to think about the actual issue of what we were going to do with the storm.

In deference to the thoroughly beaten dragons, we left the great hall, which was filled with the sort of atmosphere you'd expect at a wake, and

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relocated to a smaller room.

From what Naden said, this was like a waiting room for those who would be having an audience with Madam Tiamat. In that room, I addressed my companions.

“Naden and I saw something in that storm.”

“Saw something?” Liscia asked.

I nodded. “I got just a glimpse of a black thing through a gap in the clouds.”

“You’re sure you didn’t imagine it, right?”

“We heard a voice, too, so I’m confident. I only really picked up fragments of words, like ‘you’ and ‘destroy,’ though. You heard it, too, right, Naden?”

“I did hear it, yes, but I wasn’t able to make it out that clearly.” Naden crossed her arms and groaned in thought. “That, and I don’t think it was in our language. Like, I could tell they were saying something, but I had no idea what it was?”

“Hm? Master could hear it, but Madam Naden couldn’t?” Carla asked in surprise, tilting her head to the side in confusion.

“...May I interject for a moment?” Kaede, who had kept quiet up until now, raised her hand.

With her perception, Kaede worked as a staff officer for Ludwin, who was seen as the future commander-in-chief of the National Defense Force. In our current situation, without Hakuya around, she was a reliable thinker.

“If I recall, you aren’t from this world, right, sire?” she asked.

“Huh? Oh, yeah, that’s right.”

“In your world, they must have used a different language than what we speak in this one. In spite of that, you understand our language, and we understand yours because of a strange power.”

That was right. To be more precise, Liscia and the others heard the Japanese I was speaking as Japanese, but they could apparently understand it. The reverse was also true. For instance, if I sang in Japanese, Liscia and the others would understand the lyrics, but if Juna then perfectly imitated my singing, Liscia and everyone else would have no idea what the lyrics meant.

Come to think of it... I can read and write in this world’s language, can’t I?

Mysteriously, I was able to recognize the writing system used in this world. I could write and read it.

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On the other hand, if I were to show Liscia something in Japanese writing, she would have no idea how to read it. So that meant the translation ability only worked on my side. Thanks to that, I was able to do my paperwork, but... could there be some meaning behind why the translation worked differently for spoken word and text?

While I was wondering about that, Kaede asked Naden, "Madam Naden, you and your fellow dragons are able to speak directly to our conscious minds, right?"

"Yeah. We call it speaking into the heart, or psychic speech, though."

"That's where I've had a thought," Kaede said. "I think His Majesty's ability could be similar."

That made sense. Telepathy, huh? It wasn't directly working on the sense of hearing, it was working on the part of the brain that processed information. Maybe Tomoe's ability to talk with animals and demons worked similarly.

But why had this topic suddenly come up...? Oh, right.

"It's possible that the reason I could make out what it was saying, and Naden couldn't, was that one of us had a power like that working for us, and the other didn't, you mean."

"Yes. I can't help but suspect that."

"Well, does that mean that whoever's in that cloud was using the language from the world Souma came from?" Liscia asked.

Oh, yeah. That was a possibility, wasn't it?

But Kaede firmly shook her head at the suggestion. "I don't think so."

"How can you be so sure?" Liscia asked.

"It would be faster to put this to the test. Sire, I know this may be a bit of a bother, but can you teach me how you greet each other in the morning in the language of the world you came from? Slowly, please."

When she said that to me, I broke it down for her syllable by syllable. "O-ha-yo-u."

"*Ohayou,* is it?" Kaede asked. "*Ohayou,* princess."

Liscia looked surprised and her eyes opened wide. "Weird! They both sound like '*Ohayou,*' but I understand it means 'Good morning' when Souma says it, and when I hear it from Kaede, it sounds like an unfamiliar language."

"I-Is that how it is?" I asked.

Kaede nodded. "Yes. I think this is proof that the one in the cloud wasn't speaking in the language of the world you came from. If they were using the

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language of your country, Naden would have heard them pronounce the words '*you*' and '*destroy*,' even if she didn't understand them."

Even if she hadn't heard them as words, she'd have heard them being pronounced... huh.

Kaede brought a hand to her mouth and spoke as if thinking aloud. "His Majesty understood the one in the cloud, but Naden didn't. And it's hard to think it was the language of the world His Majesty came from. That would lead to the conclusion that the one in the cloud was speaking a language that isn't the common language of this continent, and isn't the language of the world His Majesty came from."

What was that? Did that mean the person in the cloud wasn't from this world, or from my world, but from some other world entirely? If there was someone like that out there, we'd really have no way of knowing how to deal with them.

...Wait, huh?

No, that's not it, I thought. *They don't need to have come from another world. We already have them. Here, on this continent, there are already people using a completely different language.*

"Demons..."

When I said that word, everyone gulped.

The mysterious races, different from monsters, said to live deep within the Demon Lord's Domain. The only known case of dialogue with them had been a short exchange between Tomoe and a kobold. It was something that only worked because of Tomoe's special ability, so that was to be expected.

It wouldn't be strange at all for them to have their own language system, completely separate from the common language of this continent and the languages of the world I'd come from. Also, if the demons were able to speak, my mysterious translation ability might allow me to hear it. Just like how, in the middle of the storm, I was the only one who'd been able to make out what was said.

My ability wouldn't let me hear what animals were saying like Tomoe's did, but maybe it would allow me to talk to demons?

"...Do you think that could be why Madam Tiamat called me the 'key'?" I asked.

"I think that's likely it." Kaede nodded.

Holding her head in her hands, Liscia said, "Suppose for a moment... that really is a demon in the clouds..."

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“Suppose it is?” I asked.

“I don’t want you to go, Souma.” Liscia said, looking me straight in the eye. “It’s too dangerous. If anything were to happen to you, our country... I would...”

Aisha was the next to speak up. “That’s right! I’ll go in His Majesty’s place, and I’ll cut that evil thing down!”

I was sure they were both worried for my safety. I knew how weak I was, so I would normally avoid this kind of danger. But this one time, I felt like there was no way around it.

“If this could be solved with martial prowess, Madam Tiamat wouldn’t have bothered to call me here. There are plenty of folks out there who are stronger than me, after all. Since that’s not it, Madam Tiamat must think this incident should be resolved through dialogue.”

“But...” Aisha complained.

“I think this is a valuable opportunity. Our country has the good fortune to be far from the Demon Lord’s Domain. If we miss this chance, though, there’s no telling when our next opportunity to hold dialogue with a demon will come. We should gather what information we can, while we’re able to do it.”

“Souma...” Still looking worried, Liscia put a hand on my shoulder.

“Of course, I intend to keep myself as safe as possible,” I assured her. “We have the equipment we brought from the kingdom, too. I’ll also have Aisha come to escort me. I want everyone else to wait on the ground. Naden, I want you to let Aisha ride on your back, too. Is that going to be okay?”

I heard that dragons only let their partners ride on their backs, after all.

Naden thought about it for a while. “Hmm, I don’t like it, but... Aisha is my partner’s partner, so I guess we can treat her as being like my partner, too? Just remember that she won’t receive my protection, so she better be tied down tightly, okay?”

Carla crossed her arms and groaned. “‘The partner of my partner is my partner,’ is it? It seems I can’t accompany you, then. I can’t fly in these winds, either. I did want to do something to help...”

“There’s no helping it, given the situation,” I said. “Aisha, sorry to make you do this, but protect me.”

“I am already the one who protects you, your kochiji!” Aisha said, thumping her chest with pride.

Liscia took her hand. “Aisha, look after Souma for me.”

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“Lady Liscia... Yes! Please, leave it to me!” Aisha put her other hand on top of Liscia’s.

Now then... For now, that was about it, right? Everyone had their roles assigned... Wait, huh? I looked around at my comrades and noticed something.

“Huh? Where did Hal go?”

“Huh? Now that you mention it... he’s not here.” Liscia looked around restlessly. There were only six people in this room: Liscia, Aisha, Naden, Carla, Kaede, and me. Where did Hal go off to?

“About that...” Kaede said, seeming to not want to say any more. “He has some preparations to make, you know? So he’s sitting this meeting out.”

“Preparations?” I asked.

“Well, um... Think of it as insurance, in case something happens.” Kaede said in a way that implied some deeper meaning.

Maybe Kaede was getting something ready in case an unexpected situation were to arise. Kaede had great foresight, so if she was preparing something to help us, that was reassuring.

“I wouldn’t get your hopes up, you know... (Is Hal going to be okay...? He understood what her proposal meant when he accepted it, right?)”

“Hm? Your voice got quiet at the end there,” I said.

“...No, it’s nothing, you know.” Kaede said, hurriedly shaking her head.

I didn’t really get it, but... Well, whatever.

“Anyway, everyone, I’m counting on you,” I said.

“So, why exactly are you wearing that thing, Souma?” Liscia asked, staring at me with distaste, while we were preparing to go into the cloud.

I was dressed up in a roly-poly kigurumi costume. In its hands was a naginata; over its shoulder a string of prayer beads; over its face a silk covering from under which peeked two adorable acorn-like eyes. It was one of the Little Musashibo (Large) dolls that I hadn’t worn myself since the time I drank with Juno and her party. This Little Musashibo was one of the pieces of equipment I’d brought with us from the kingdom, just in case.

“I told you I intend to keep myself as safe as possible, didn’t I?” I opened up the head portion wide and turned to face Liscia.

The one I wore before was the type you enter from a hole in the back, but on this one, the head opened upward like the lid of a rice cooker. It was markedly easier to put on and take off than the previous ones. I was working

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on even more simple upgrades to it even now.

"Even if it looks like this, I spent more money than I should have to make it out of good materials, so it's sturdier than your average piece of armor, you know? It's highly bladeproof, bulletproof, cold-resistant, heat-resistant, and acid-resistant. You can fight dungeon monsters in this thing. My Living Poltergeists works on it, too, so it's easy to move around in."

"Still... Sigh, I feel stupid for worrying." Liscia was holding her head.

Wow, we hadn't done this in a while. When we first met, I felt like Liscia was always being dragged around by whatever I was doing, and she was constantly holding her head.

Well... she had company now...

"Something is wrong," Naden muttered when she saw me in my kigurumi equipment. "I dreamed of having a knight ride on my back, so why do I have to let this mysterious creature (?) fly with me...?" She held her head.

"No, no, I don't want to hear that from an actual mysterious creature like a ryuu."

"I'm going to fly with you wearing that thing?! Isn't it a little too silly?!"

"..."

Dendera, dendera, a ryuu flies through the sea of clouds. On its back is a deeply satisfied Little Musashibo.

...Yeah. Just imagining that, I felt the sense of mysterious fantasy running wild.

"W-Well, this is an emergency," I said. "Just bear with me, please."

"Urgh... Fine, I get it."

"Aisha, are you ready, too?" I called.

"Any time you are!" With her usual greatsword over her shoulder, Aisha gave me a firm nod.

Because we would be going through wind and rain, Aisha was wearing a rain-repelling cape that covered her whole body over the top of her usual light equipment.

Now then, with our preparations ready, it was time to go. To meet whoever was in those thick clouds.

And so, the ryuu flew into the storm. On her back rode a dark elf in a raincoat, and a roly-poly mystery creature (?).

The wind roared by our ears.

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Naden pushed forward as if it was no big deal, but the wind and beating against our bodies was as strong as ever.

"Aisha, are you okay?!" I called.

"Just fine! The shaking isn't as bad up here as it was in the gondola!"

Unlike with me, Naden's protection didn't cover Aisha, so she was experiencing the full effects of the wind, rain, and gravity. That was why I had Aisha sitting in front of me, tied down with rope, just like Little Musashibo. Though, with the way Little Musashibo was built, it did look a bit like she was strapped into a first class seat.

"Still, do you suppose we can find whoever it is out there in this storm?" Aisha asked, protecting her face from the rain with her arms. "The rain is making the visibility terrible."

True enough, searching for anything in this rain was going to be hard.

...Actually, now that I was already wearing it, I realized this kigurumi suit left me with a really narrow field of vision. You might be thinking this should have been obvious, but because my ability, Living Poltergeists, let me look at things with an overhead view, it never bothered me before. However, in this storm, I couldn't get the overhead view to work properly.

I mean, yes, I could see, but it was like looking at the static on an old TV with bad reception. I hadn't noticed it before because I never tried moving things around inside a storm, but did my ability have other weaknesses like this?

With no other choice, I snapped open Little Musashibo's head. There was a sudden, powerful gust of wind in my face, but if I couldn't use my ability, I was going to have to rely on my own eyes. Like Aisha said, visibility was still poor, but there might not be any need to search to begin with.

"If they're the one causing this storm, they're sure to be in the center of it, Naden," I said.

"I know. We'll be at the center of the storm soon."

Then, all of a sudden, the sound of wind and rain lessened. Had the storm weakened?

The feeling of raindrops striking my face was gone now. The wind was still strong, but the lack of rain made things much easier on me. Still, we were surrounded by clouds here.

Nah, if we were inside a cloud, it would feel like we were enveloped in fog. If I could tell there were clouds surrounding us, that meant that this spot was the one place without any clouds.

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“This is...”

“Sire! Look up!” Aisha called.

At Aisha’s urging, I looked up, and there...

“What is that thing...?”

There was a huge, gray mass floating there. It was more or less a cube, with around ten meters to each side. Naden, in her current ryuu form, was around forty meters long, so it was questionable whether it would be possible for her to wrap herself around it once. That massive cube was ignoring gravity and floating there.

“Is that what you saw, sire?”

“...I’m not sure. I could only see its shadow.”

“But that’s definitely the thing that’s at the center of this current!” Naden said, glaring at the cube.

That was... what caused the storm? Kaede’s reasoning was that it was a demon, but was that thing even alive? Whether I judged it by the standards of this world, or the standards of my former one, that thing was bizarre. Then...

“Why.... you... not... answer...”

I heard that voice again. It sounded broken up, and was hard to make out, but it was high, like a woman’s voice, only something felt off about it. Was it coming from that cube?

“Aisha, Naden, did you understand that language?” I asked. “It was saying something about an answer.”

“Was it, sire? I couldn’t hear a thing.”

“I could tell it was saying *something*, but that’s it...”

Like we expected, they couldn’t understand the words they were hearing. I repeated the words I heard for their benefit.

“Tiama... you destroy... my children... so why...”

“Let’s see... ‘Tiama, you destroy, my children, so why,’” I translated.

“Why will you not des... I have no... left...”

“‘Why will you not des, I have no, left.’”

Naden and Aisha both groaned.

“Tiama... That’s Lady Tiamat, right?” Naden asked. “It’s gotta be.”

“It certainly does sound like they have something to say to Madam Tiamat,” Aisha said.

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I agreed with the two of them. Did Madam Tiamat know something about this cube? Come to think of it, hadn't Madam Tiamat predicted this storm?

Could it be... this object was in contact with Tiamat before? While I was thinking that, the quality of the voice suddenly changed.

"Even after... still you... don't resp..."

"'Even after, still you, don't resp'... huh."

The voice I was hearing was level, with no intonation. But, from the choice of words, I sensed something like anger. The full picture of things wasn't clear, but it felt like it was criticizing her harshly.

"I feel like I get it, but I don't," said Aisha, twisting her head to the side. "I wish it would come out and say it more clearly."

Naden was thinking, too. "'You' is... probably Lady Tiamat, right? Does that mean..."

"Hold on! They're still saying something." I cut Naden off, and listened.

"In that case..."

"'In that case,'" I repeated.

"I... will destroy... your children's world."

"Wha?!"

"Whoa, Souma?! What'd they say?!" Naden shouted, but I couldn't put it into words immediately.

I will destroy your children's world?

If Naden was right, and the "you" here was Madam Tiamat, then her children were Naden and the dragons, and the world they lived in was Dracul. Did that voice intend to destroy it? It was a clear warning of destructive intent.

Is this... not something we can resolve with dialogue...?

"I... destroy. So that you... destroy me..."

"Wha?!"

I will destroy. So that you will destroy me. That was what it sounded like to me.

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Destroying, in order to be destroyed? The owner of this voice didn't want to destroy Dracul, it was trying to get Madam Tiamat to destroy them by doing so. They were mad because Madam Tiamat refused to do it? In other words, this storm was being produced by the owner of the voice's desire to be annihilated.

"Souma!" Naden called, snapping me back to my senses.

"Ah!"

"Get it together! You're the only one here who understands what that thing says, you know?!"

"Sorry. It seems like that thing is trying to destroy Dracul because it wants Madam Tiamat to destroy it."

"Huh? It's the one who wants to be destroyed, but it's destroying someone else's land? I admit I don't understand the desire to be destroyed, but aren't its objective and method somewhat disjointed?" Aisha looked perplexed.

Even I didn't understand the reason.

"Well, whatever the case, that thing's come all the way to Dracul looking to be destroyed. But Madam Tiamat seems to have refused, maybe for a good reason. That's apparently why that thing caused the storm. It seems to think that if it puts Madam Tiamat's children... that is to say, the dragons... in peril, Madam Tiamat will be forced to destroy it."

"That's a lot of 'seem's' and 'apparently's', don't you think?"

"Hey, it's not like I can help it. I'm working with fragmentary information."

Madam Tiamat knew all the details, probably, but, like Hakuya said before, she told me she lacked the "authority" to tell me about it, so that was the end of that.

Could the reason Madam Tiamat chose not to destroy that thing have to do with this "authority" business, as well?

"I... destroy. So... you... will destroy..."

The voice repeated those words again. Then around twenty small spherical objects flew out of the upper half of the gray cube. Well, I called them small, but they were only small relative to the cube. In terms of size, they were probably a meter in diameter. Those spheres didn't float, and were pulled downward by gravity.

Seeing that, Naden asked in a panicked voice, "Hey, Souma, are

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those...?”

“Yeah. They look like bad news to me, too.”

Countless mystery spheres had appeared after it talked about destruction. I had a bad feeling about this.

“Naden! Can you shoot them down without getting closer?!” I called.

“I’ll do it!”

Roaaaaaaaaaaar!

Naden roared, unleashing an electric strike on the things that had flown out. The electric strike branched out as it went forward, piercing through the scattered spheres. Then...

Boom!

The moment the electricity struck them, those spheres let out a brilliant blue and white flash, and swelled up to become balls of light. Following the light, we heard a rumbling sound, and the wind pressure that slammed into us after that told us all too clearly how incredible the explosion was.

I knew it... Those black spheres were something like bombs!

Aisha turned back to me, as if she just remembered something. “This is bad, sire! Liscia and the others are down there!”

“I know. Naden, I’m counting on you! Shoot them down, no matter what!”

“That was the plan all along!”

While swimming through the sky, Naden unleashed electric shock after electric shock, shooting down the falling objects one after another. But there were just too many.

“Madam Naden! I will assist you!” Aisha undid the ropes fixing her in place, and stood up. “Sire, hold me in place, please!”

“L-Like this?!” I pulled my upper torso out of the Little Musashibo doll, and wrapped my arms around Aisha’s hips. At the same time, I controlled the Little Musashibo doll, having it hold Aisha’s ankles to keep her in place. Aisha, who was now riding on Naden’s back in a standing position, readied her usual greatsword.

“Now then, sire, keep your head down, please!”

“S-Sure.”

“Here I go... Hahhhhhh!” With a loud cry of exertion, Aisha swung her greatsword.

The blast of wind I had seen before while watching her training with Liscia flew forth, splitting one of the falling objects in two. Then a sideways

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swing; a diagonal slash from the left; a diagonal slash from the right. With each swing of Aisha's greatsword, a sharp blast of wind would fly forth, cutting down one of the falling objects.

Aisha was always a bit of a disappointment in her daily life, but on the battlefield she was reliable, and the most powerful warrior in the kingdom.

With Naden and Aisha going to work, the spherical objects dropped by the cube were either blown up or cut in two. However, it kept dropping them, one after another.

"This is endless..." Aisha groaned.

"But if we don't shoot them down, they'll cause damage below," Naden said.

"We cannot advance, and we cannot retreat. We'll be whittled down to nothing like this."

Aisha was probably right. Damn! If only we could get in touch with the ground, we could warn them of the danger and have them evacuate. I should have brought a Factory Arm to serve as a relay... Well, whining about the things I didn't have wasn't going to help.

"Oh, geez. What can we do?" I looked up at the cube, wracking my brains.

Then it happened.

"Heyyyyyy..."

I heard a voice coming from somewhere. It was unlike the voice I had been hearing up until now. This time, it was a man's voice.

"Heyyyyy! Soumaaaaa!"

This voice was coming... from below?!

When I leaned over Naden's side to look down, I saw a red dragon driving toward us at an incredible speed. Her wings were folded, and she was in an almost arrow-like shape. Hold on, wasn't she flying awfully fast for not beating her wings?

Furthermore, Halbert was on her back, holding on for dear life.

"Hal?!" I shouted.

"Ruby?!" Naden cried out at the same time.

Ruby shot past us with Halbert riding on her back. The two of them continued to ascend vertically like that, but eventually they lost inertia, and started falling upside down. Her wings weren't spread... Oh, that was it!

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Because if she spread them, they'd be affected by the winds, huh!

"Naden!" I called.

"I know!"

Naden got underneath the falling Ruby and caught her. From there, she wrapped her body around Ruby and fixed her in place. Ruby sounded relieved when she said, "This method of flying's... not easy on the heart."

"Ruby, how did you...?"

"Save the chitchat for later! We can't let those things reach the ground, right?!"

With those words, Ruby inhaled deeply, and set loose the flamethrower known as a dragon's breath. The flames stretched out like a blowtorch, frying the objects and making them explode.

When she saw that, Naden spun her body around flinging electrical shocks in all directions. With that, Ruby's breath went around like the hands of a clock, setting off the falling objects across an even wider area.

The area around us was filled with brilliant flames, electricity, and explosions. It irritated my eyes.

By triggering all of them to explode at once, it had given us some leeway until the next set were dropped.

"So, how are you here, Ruby?" Naden asked Ruby, who was breathing a little raggedly, when things settled down. Now that she mentioned it, hadn't we talked about how a winged dragon couldn't fly in these wild air currents?

"I had this person here cooperate with me... and did some crazy things to fly up here..." Ruby said while trying to catch her breath. Stretching out her long neck, she used her snout to point to her back.

By "this person here," did she mean Hal?

"Hal, just what on Earth did you do...?" I asked, feeling thoroughly exhausted.

Hal pointed behind him. "Souma... You brought this, didn't you? We used it... to fly right here."

What Hal was pointing at as he said that was the Maxwellian Propulsion Device affixed to the back of his saddle, the Little Susumu Mark V Light.

My eyes went wide.

So this was what Kaede was talking about!

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Earlier...

“I’d like to ask you a favor.” I sat my aching body up, corrected my posture, and then bowed my head to the red-haired young man.

When I did, Hal exchanged glances with the fox-eared girl... Kaede, was it? “I’m not sure this is the time to suddenly be asking for favors...”

“First, I’d like to hear what that favor is, you know,” said Kaede. “Is there something you’d like to ask Hal for?”

“I don’t care what it is. Just give me something I can do!” I said pleadingly. I bowed my head again deeply. “I don’t want to rely on Naden to fix this situation! If I leave the fate of Dracul to Naden, while I do nothing... I won’t be able to have pride in myself anymore.”

I couldn’t fly in this storm. Even so, if I let Naden do all the work, I wouldn’t be living up to the reputation of the dragons of the Star Dragon Mountain Range.

That wasn’t all. If I made Naden take all the risks, and then something happened to her, I’d never be able to forgive myself.

“You’re that king, Souma’s, vassals, aren’t you? There’s nothing we can do, but since you two have come from outside the Star Dragon Mountain Range, I thought you might have some way of doing it.”

“I dunno...” said Halbert.

“I don’t care how dangerous it is. I want you to let me do something, too.” My feelings were tearing me up inside.

Hal scratched his head with a troubled look on his face. “Hmm, I don’t have any idea how to fly when the skies are so bad that even a dragon can’t fly. Kaede’s magic manipulates gravity, but even with that, she can only make things float off the ground a little. Right?”

“Yeah. I don’t think earth magic is going to be able to do anything here,” Kaede nodded.

Was it like I feared? Was there nothing I could do?

When despair was beginning to set in, Kaede suddenly said, “But it’s not like we don’t have any way at all, you know.”

“Y-You have something?!”

“It’s dangerous, but... if your wings are going to catch the wind, you can just not open them, you know.”

Not open my wings? She was telling me to fly without flapping my wings? That was... something only Naden could do.

Hal also had a dubious look on his face. “No, no, how is a winged dragon

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supposed to fly without her wings?”

However, Kaede just looked at him with exasperation. “Have you forgotten, Hal? The thing we have in the gondola.”

“In the gondola? Let’s see, there’s that weird kigurumi thing that Souma uses, and... Oh, that! The propeller, that Little Susumu whatchamacallit!”

Propeller? I had no idea what they were talking about, but they seemed to think it would work.

Kaede pointed at my back and said, “Dragons and wyverns are different sizes, yes, but their overall shape is similar. If we put the Little Susumu Mark V Light on her back, like we do for the wyvern cavalry, then fire it up to full power, even with her wings folded, I think she could climb straight up from the ground.”

“I get your reasoning, but... isn’t that dangerous?” Hal asked dubiously. “She can only rise straight up, right?”

Kaede nodded, affirming his concerns. “Of course. There’s no way to change direction. It’s only able to go up. Besides, we haven’t tested it in storm conditions, so I don’t know if what I was just saying is actually possible.” Kaede looked concerned. “However, as things stand, if she wants to do something, this is about the only way...”

“I don’t mind,” I said firmly. “I’m well aware of the danger. Let me do it.”

“Ruby...”

“Aw, geez! Looks like I’ve got no other choice!” Hal scratched his head, a grin on his face. “I’m the one who got you fired up to do this. I’ll have to go with you.”

Halbert’s proposal made Kaede’s eyes go wide. “Hal... you do understand what you’re saying means, don’t you?”

“That I’ll be in danger? Yeah, I’m ready for that. Besides, the dragon wearing the propeller can’t control it. She needs someone to ride her and steer it, right?”

“That’s not my only concern... Oh, geez, there’s no other choice, is there?” Kaede muttered. “Fine. I’ll find a good way to tell His Majesty.”

Kaede shrugged her shoulders in resigned exasperation as she approved the idea.

“Thank you. Hal, Kaede.”

I bowed my head to the two of them again. I couldn’t have been more grateful.

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Here and now, an impromptu red dragon knight was born.

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While Naden and Aisha continued intercepting the falling objects, I gave Hal and Ruby a quick rundown of the situation.

This cube was causing the storm, the objects it was dropping were bombs, and it would be dangerous to let them fall to the surface. I didn't mention that the thing was apparently trying to destroy Dracul so that it would be destroyed itself. I had no proof, and I didn't want to take the time to explain it.

When they heard my explanation, Hal and Ruby nodded in unison.

"Got it," Hal said. "We'll handle contacting the ground."

"The other dragons can fight from down on the ground, too." Ruby stretched her neck, bringing her face closer to Naden's. "So, Naden, don't worry about things down below. Head straight for that thing."

"Can I trust you to handle this?" Naden asked.

"Your job is to carry Souma, right? As a dragon of the Star Dragon Mountain Range, I may not be able to clear the way for you, but I'll at least cover your back."

"...Okay."

Naden uncoiled herself and released Ruby. The moment they were set free, Hal and Ruby let gravity take its course and fell straight down.

I shouted after them, "Hal! Take care of Liscia and the others!"

"Count on it! You do your thing, too!"

The opposite of the way they came, Hal and Ruby fell headlong to the surface. Even as they were falling, Hal threw the spear he was holding and took down one of the falling objects. It looked like his dratrooper training had paid off. Red-haired Halbert, riding on a red dragon, and throwing a spear... huh.

"They're doing the whole dragon knight thing properly, huh..."

"You can say that again," said Naden. "Meanwhile, we're all weird."

"Now, now, sire," Aisha said. "They're them, and we're us. Why can't we just leave it at that?"

""Pfft!"" When Aisha summed it up like that, Naden and I cracked up laughing. When she dismissed it in such a carefree way, even if Dracul was in danger, it felt like it wasn't a big deal.

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Yeah, I was starting to feel like we could do something about this.

"Haha... Now then, let's leave the falling objects to those on the ground, and go take a look at that cube ourselves," I said.

"Yeah. Let's go, Souma, Aisha."

"Okay!" Aisha cried.

With a burst of acceleration, Naden began to climb.

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When Halbert and Ruby returned to the ground, the dragons had all gathered in front of Crystal Castle. They could see Kaede, Liscia, and Carla standing at the feet of those huge creatures, so Halbert and Ruby landed next to them.

"Hal, how were things up in the sky?" Kaede asked.

Halbert pointed upward and said, "There was this weird blocky guy up there. Souma and the others are heading to make contact. More importantly, though, there're going to be bomb-like things dropping. We've gotta intercept them."

"You're talking about intercepting them, but with all this rain, flames are going to be only half as powerful," Carla, who also used fire magic, pointed out.

The flames that dragons could spew were powerful, but they would probably be weakened and blown away in all this wind and rain.

Liscia nodded bitterly. "My ice isn't something I can shoot into the sky, either."

"There is a way, you know," Kaede said, then crouched down and ran her hand over the ground. "You'll have to forgive a little change in the topography, though."

With that, the ground began to swell up, and masses of rock and sand about a meter across rolled around all over the place. Kaede used her earth-type magic. Even at a glance, there had to be around a hundred of those masses. It must have taken a considerable amount of magical power.

As might be expected, Kaede stumbled, having overexerted herself, and Liscia hurried to catch her.

"A-Are you okay?"

"Sorry. I overdid it a little."

With Liscia supporting her, Kaede explained the strategy to everyone.

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“I want the dragons to throw these masses of dirt at the falling objects. With a dragon’s strength, you should be able to throw them fairly high. As for everyone else, I’d like you to use bows enchanted with magic. The priority is to protect Crystal Castle and the dragon eggs lying dormant beneath it. Even if you have to ignore the others, please prioritize intercepting any objects falling toward Crystal Castle.”

“Got it... You heard her, everyone!” Liscia helped Kaede to stand, then shouted to her companions and the dragons. Because she was the princess of a nation, she naturally ended up giving commands here. “We’re going to support Naden and Souma from here!”

“”””Yeahhhh!”””

“”””Roaaaaaaaaaar!”””

Her companions let out a war cry, and the dragons all roared at once.

“Ruby, we’re going back to intercept them in the sky,” Halbert said.

“Yes. Let’s go, Hal.”

Halbert and Ruby flew back up with the Little Susumu Mark V Light.

Everyone was trying their hardest to do what they could right now. While watching that scene unfold, Liscia nocked an arrow.

We’re going to do what we can to protect this place.

As she drew back on the bowstring, Liscia thought of Souma and the others up in the sky.

So, everyone... Make sure you come home all right.

Letting it carry those feelings, Liscia loosed her arrow into the sky thick with clouds.

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“Whoa,” Aisha said suddenly.

“Are you okay, Aisha?” I asked with concern.

“Y-Yes!”

When we rose, we forgot that Aisha had undone the ropes that had been keeping her in place. I caught her when she lost her balance, and tied the rope around me to fix us in position. Even as I was doing that, Naden continued to evade the falling objects and approach the cube. Outside of scattering bombs, the cube didn’t do anything to intercept us, and we were easily able to come up alongside it.

Is this cube... ignoring us?

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Did that mean its only target, or the only thing that interested it, was Madam Tiamat? Or did it have an absolute confidence that no one but Madam Tiamat could destroy it? Whatever the case, we'd gotten close enough that we could have hopped over to it, so we were able to observe the cube up close.

It was, as I suspected, a cube with ten meters to a side.

The surface that looked gray from a distance was made from layers of a glossy stone like cut obsidian, and there were elevated geometrical patterns on it. It was clearly artificial, but some parts were covered in moss. Other parts were hard to tell whether they were old or new. There was no sign of any sort of propeller or jet engine; it was really floating.

Hm... I heard a voice, so I was expecting a creature, or a vehicle of some type...

No matter how I looked at it, this was just a cube. Not a vehicle, or anything like that.

Still, there was no way an ordinary cube, with no means of propulsion, would be floating high up in the sky. Maybe, unlike its simple exterior, the inside of this thing was really complex.

I don't know if this was proof of that, but the upper front side had countless holes in it, and they were spewing out those bomb-like objects. The image of it spitting out bombs at regular intervals was very systematic, and *mechanical.*

If that was the case, then maybe this was an example of what Genia called overtechnology, like the Jewel Voice Broadcast jewels, or the Lunalith which was said to be in the Orthodox Papal State of Lunaria.

"Looking at the surface... I don't think it's impossible to cut it," Aisha said. "Do you mind if I try?"

"...Can you aim for a corner? If it breaks and falls, there's no telling what effect that could have, after all."

"Yes, sir... Hah!"

Aisha swung her greatsword, firing off that sharp blast of wind. The blast of wind landed a square blow on the corner of the cube... Or it should have. However, the cube showed no sign of change.

Aisha lowered her greatsword and groaned. "Hrm... This surface is much harder than steel."

Did that mean she could have cut through steel?

Aisha pulled out a knife from her pocket and threw it at the cube. The

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knife flew straight at it, then there was a strange high-pitched noise, and it fell.

"Look. There isn't even a tiny scratch on the surface."

"Does that mean it's super hard?"

"No, it didn't sound like it made contact. It looked like it was deflected just before it touched the surface, too."

"Hmm... Does it have a force field of some sort up?"

"Forsfild? What's that?" Aisha asked, looking confused.

"It's a scientific sort of barrier. Even in my old world, they only existed in fiction."

It was a sci-fi sort of ability, but I felt like it might be possible with overscience, which went beyond the realm of human understanding.

I had an idea for something we could try.

"Naden, could you hit it with an electric shock?" I asked.

"Okay, but... are you sure you want me to go at full power?"

"Yeah. Give it everything you've got."

"Okay, then... Hah!"

Zap, crackle!

Naden's mane stood on end as she unleashed an electric shock into the cube.

Purple lightning tore through the air, and just as it was about to impact the cube, another indescribable sound, much louder than the one before, echoed through the area. It was like someone magnified the sound of nails on a chalkboard, then ran it through a filter. It was a noise that grated on the ears like that.

However, even though the noise was loud enough to be pain-inducing, there was no change in the cube. How tough was that thing...?

I scratched my head. "Physical attacks, magic, and electricity, all ineffective, huh? It says it wants to be destroyed, but the thing's way too tough."

"Isn't that why it wants Lady Tiamat to break it?" asked Naden.

"Yeah, that's probably it..."

While wracking my brain over what to do, I heard that voice again.

"I will destroy. So that you will destroy me."

I heard it clearly. The voice was too high to be male, which made it seem to be female, but there was something off about it. Now that I heard it clearly,

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something caught my attention about it.

This voice...

I'd heard it somewhere before. For some reason, that was the sense I got. But where?

I tried searching my memories, but the cube wasn't going to give me time.

Tiamat... if this is not enough to make you destroy me...

There was a sound from the bottom of the cube.

"Naden, head down!" I called.

"You got it!"

We moved down, and the bottom face opened up like a box. Something shaped like a telephoto camera lens grew straight out of the bottom.

This telephoto-lens-like thing... I had a real bad feeling about it.

"I really will destroy everything of yours."

The lens sticking out of the bottom began to emit light. It was a pale light at first, but it gradually grew brighter.

This scene... I'd seen something like it in an old-ish sci-fi movie. The bottom of the massive saucer from space opened up, it gradually filled with more and more light... and then the light flooded out and blew away the buildings and cities beneath it.

Wait, Liscia and the others were under this thing!

"Aisha, Naden, attack that part on the bottom!" I cried.

"O-Okay!"

"Roger that! Hahhhhh!"

Aisha launched a blast of wind from her sword, and Naden fired off an electrical attack. However, despite the loud noises, the telephoto-lens-like thing was unaffected, and it continued to gather light.

At this point, I could only imagine a future where that light was fired down at the ground.

"Stoooooop!" I screamed, despite myself, as loud as I possibly could.

"S-Sire?" said Aisha.

"Souma?" faltered Naden.

I kept shouting at the cube. "If you want to get busted, then go fall somewhere, or sink into the ocean, and break on your own! Don't get other people... don't get my family caught up in your self-destructive urges, you

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dummy!”

“Com... lang... detected... abling functions.”

With that, the light suddenly stopped gathering, and the telephoto-lens-like thing sticking out of the bottom gradually lost its shine. Eventually it vanished completely, and the cube tucked that lens back inside itself. Had it... stopped?

Looking at it carefully, the cube stopped dropping those objects, too.

“Do you suppose it’s stopped?” Aisha asked.

“Did what Souma say stop it?”

Aisha and Naden were both perplexed. Like Naden was saying, the timing with which it happened suggested it listened to my shouting. Maybe my words got through to it? Come to think of it...

“Sup... lang... detected... abling functions.”

That was definitely what the cube said. There had been noise interrupting it, so I couldn’t pick up everything it said, but was “disabling functions” what it said?

If so, the first half, “Sup, lang, detected,” interested me. “Detected” seemed pretty straightforward, but “sup, lang” meant... Huh?!

This cube stopped because I shouted. If this cube detected my words, and disabled its functions as a result, then this “sup, lang” was in reference to what I said.

In other words...

“Supported language...”

“Supported language detected. Disabling functions.”

Had that been what the cube said?

A supported language... the language I was speaking... Japanese?!

Had this cube shut down because I used Japanese?

Was Japanese the key...? No, it was saying “supported language,” so it might support languages other than Japanese, too. Thinking more broadly, had the cube shut down because I used one of the languages of Earth, or because I used a language from a different world?

When I reached that conclusion, the shards of various memories inside me started to connect.

The reason Madam Tiamat called me the key and invited me to the Star Dragon Mountain Range. Was it not because I was a hero, but because I was

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Japanese, or I was from Earth, or from another world?

The language I used... I didn't know whether it was because it was Japanese, because it was a language of Earth, or because it was a language from another world, but Madam Tiamat must have known it would be the key to stopping that cube.

"It could be that Madam Tiamat is familiar with your world to some degree," Hakuya said. *"If Madam Tiamat was certain that you'd know about ryuus, that means she must have known that the world you came from had a concept of what a ryuu is."*

"Madam Tiamat... knew about the world I came from?" I murmured.

I had this conversation with Hakuya just a few days ago.

We inferred that Madam Tiamat might know something about my world. I was becoming convinced of that now. Madam Tiamat, the cube, and the world I came from.

If there was some link between them, did that mean this world and that world were connected in some way, too? In other words...

This world, which I thought was another world, might not actually be another world.

Oh, geez... I just don't know anymore.

I had a lot of different speculations flying around in my head, but none of them were any more than speculation.

Even if I wanted to make a judgment on it, I lacked the information to.

There was just one thing I knew about this world, and it was that I still knew nothing about it. Just as my mind reached an extreme state of confusion...

"I see... That's why Tiamat..."

The cube started saying something again.

"The fam... are still... not... lost..."

Its voice was cutting out. It was hard to make out what it was saying like that, but it didn't seem angry, or sad. It sounded lonely, but almost like it was praying for something.

"...iliar one... I have... request..."

"The fam... iliar one? Oh, familiar ones? But what is this request?" I asked the cube.

Perhaps because it understood me, the cube began to explain.

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“Please... familiar one... before your li... to an end... beg you... ease... give my children peace... days...”

Damn! We were finally holding a conversation, but there was too much being lost in the middle. It seemed like the cube was speaking fluently, but the static was so bad that I couldn’t figure out what it was saying.

“I can’t hear you when you talk too long!” I called. “Tell me what you want, as briefly as possible!”

The cube answered in one breath.

“Go north.”

Go north, huh?

With that, the cube vanished.

“I-It disappeared...” I murmured.

It didn’t fly away, or anything like that. It just vanished in an instant. Most likely, it used a teleportation technique, like Madam Tiamat.

When the cube vanished, the storm that had been raging so hard turned into a simple mass of clouds that eventually spread out and dissipated. Before I knew it, we were left beneath a sky with the sun going down. The clear air and the red of the setting sun sparkled to an almost blinding degree.

“It feels like we dreamed the whole thing,” Aisha said in a daze. It was the kind of abrupt change that would do that to you.

“But it wasn’t a dream, right, Souma?” said Naden. “What did that blocky thing say at the end?”

I answered her, in as much of a daze as Aisha. “...Go north. That’s what it sounded like.”

“North? By north, that has to mean...”

“The Demon Lord’s Domain... I guess?”

I felt like I had gained a lot of information from this incident. However, it created more questions than it solved. About my world, about me, about the connection between the world I came from and this one...

The only thing I could say with any clarity was that none of the answers were going to be coming anytime soon.

“Whatever the case, the storm’s passed...” I said. “Let’s head back to the others.”

Naden nodded. “Yeah. I’m feeling really exhausted.”

The situation was more or less resolved, but we didn’t feel fully satisfied

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as we returned to the ground.

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Epilogue 1: A Dance With You

“This is awful...” I muttered.

On our way back down to the ground, I could see the state Dracul was left in. It was pretty bad.

The stream that was near Naden’s cave had become swollen and muddied, and rivers everywhere overflowed, flooding the plains.

Dracul’s climate had always been controlled by Madam Tiamat, and it looked like she never considered drainage. Given how strong the dragons were, it was doubtful that any of them had died due to the flooding, but the brown, muddied rivers had ruined the once-beautiful scenery.

“Do you think Liscia and the others are all right?” I asked.

“I’m worried, but if anything comes up, I’m sure Ruby will fly back up here,” Naden said.

“I’m sure the dragons can fly now, after all,” Aisha agreed. “No news is good news.”

With Naden and Aisha saying that to cheer me up, we headed for Crystal Castle where Liscia and the others were waiting. Though the level of the lake surrounding Crystal Castle had risen, and it covered a wider area, there was no sign of any change to the castle itself. It might have been designed like a floating island.

We set down on the ground while I was still feeling relieved to see that, and Liscia and the others rushed over to us immediately.

“Souma!” Liscia immediately hugged me. “Thank goodness... you’re all right...”

“I’m glad to see you’re okay, too.” I returned Liscia’s embrace, and stroked the hair on the back of her head. I was really glad to see her all right.

Once we had held each other for a while, Liscia let go and, with a slightly angry look on her face, said, “Geez, you had me worried, you know? There were flashes up in the clouds, and then explosions. If Halbert and Ruby

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hadn't gone up there, I was about ready to put a propeller on the gondola and head up there myself, okay?"

Launching the gondola?! That would have been way too reckless.

"I-I'm sorry to make you worry," I said. "So please, don't do anything so dangerous."

"Look who's talking!" Liscia pulled on my cheek.

She... kind of had a point.

Still, she'd have come after me herself... huh. I thought Liscia had been acting more like the soon-to-be first primary queen, but you could still see bits of her tomboyish side at times like this. Well, that was who Liscia was, and I loved her for it.

Then Liscia abandoned me, and turned to Aisha and Naden. "I'm glad you two are safe, too."

"Of course we are! I got Souma there unharmed, just like I was supposed to," Naden bragged, puffing up her not-so-ample bosom with pride.

Aisha, who was much better endowed, let hers fall with a sigh of relief. "All I did was cut down bombs, but it's good to see things turned out all right."

While watching the three of them, I turned to Carla, who had walked over, and asked her a question. "Was there any damage down here on the surface?"

"No. Thanks to Sir Halbert warning us of the danger, the dragons were able to intercept the falling objects, so there was no notable damage. Liscia, Madam Kaede, and I were using magic enchanted bows to intercept the things, too. But..." Carla averted her eyes. It looked there was something she was having trouble telling me.

"Did something happen?"

"No... But something is about to, I'm sure." When she said that, she glanced behind her.

Following her line of sight, I found Kaede with her arms crossed and an imposing smile, and Hal kneeling in front of her. Ruby was behind him acting flustered.

Huh? What? It looked like he was in trouble.

"Hal, do you understand what you did?" Kaede said, looking down at Hal without dropping her smile. "You rode on the back of an unmarried dragon, you know? You know what that means, right?"

"No, um... I-I had no idea! Not that they only let those they were going to

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take as their husbands on their backs, or that not letting other men ride them was a mark of chastity!" Hal desperately explained himself, sweating bullets.

Ooh, now that he mentioned it, Naden said something like that. Could Hal have ridden Ruby without knowing anything? That was like stealing a kiss from an unmarried woman, or something along those lines. I wasn't wrong when I thought he was in trouble.

"For reference, what happens if he rode her without knowing in advance?" I asked Naden, who had a troubled look on her face and scratched her cheek.

"Hm... If he forms a contract with her, there's no problem, but if she tries to form a contract with someone else while he's still alive, she'll be seen as "easy" or a tramp. If she can't form a contract with Halbert, Ruby might not be able to form a contract for another eighty years."

Even if all they were doing was letting people ride on their backs, the dragons apparently had a very strict sense of chastity.

Kaede shrugged in disbelief. "Even if you didn't know about it before, if you listened to His Majesty and Madam Naden when they were talking, you would have known this, you know?"

"No, I do think I messed up here! But, Kaede, back then... you never stopped me from riding her!"

"Because it was a crisis," she snapped. "Knowing you, I had my doubts that you were aware of what you were doing, but given the situation, I decided to accept it, you know. Yes, even though *we just got engaged the other day.*"

"Ulp..."

Oh, Hal and Kaede were engaged, huh? Congratulations. Well, they were childhood friends, after all, and I expected it to happen eventually, so I wasn't surprised, but... if that was the case, this couldn't have happened at a worse time.

Kaede sighed, and her shoulders slumped. "And what? You didn't know? What about Ruby, who you took for a ride? She can't attend the Contract Ceremony anymore. If you don't take responsibility, she'll be alone for as long as you're alive, you know! Are you planning to waste decades of a girl's life?"

"U-Um... Kaede," Ruby ventured. "I was ready to accept that when I..."

"You shut up, Ruby!"

"Y-Yes, ma'am..." Ruby hastily stepped aside.

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“To think she could shut down Ruby with one shout...” Naden chose a weird thing to be impressed by.

Normally Kaede was the hesitant type, but when it was time to stand her ground, nothing could frighten her. Like when Hal tried to go join Georg. That it usually involved Hal was a sign of how deep her love for him was.

At this point, Carla whispered in my ear, “Um, Master, is it okay for us not to stop them?”

“Do you think anything I say is going to be persuasive?” I murmured back. “Even if there were circumstances involved, I’m trying to form a contract with Naden when I already have four fiancées.”

“...I suppose you have a point there.” Carla scooted away from me.

Yeah... that was about the reaction I should have expected.

Raising a finger next to her temple, Kaede declared, “It looks like I have no choice, you know. Please, do right by her.”

“You’re okay with that, Kaede?” Halbert asked weakly.

“I’ll let it slide this time. I need to think about what’s best for the House of Magna from here on. If all I’m considering is how to grow the House of Magna, forming a contract with a dragon like Ruby isn’t a bad thing. If you’re a dragon knight, you’ll be viewed with deference by enemy and ally alike, and that should be helpful to you when you go to war. I can accept it as a benefit to my house.”

“Kaede...”

“But this is the last time I want to see you picking up other wives because you went with the flow!”

“Uh, right... I’ll take that to heart.”

“Th-Thank you so much, Kaede.” Ruby bowed her head to Kaede in relief.

Hal seemed like he couldn’t raise his head out of deference to her. It looked like Kaede managed to show her forbearance as the head wife, while placing herself above Hal and Ruby. Now Hal would never be able to talk back to her about domestic affairs. Just like me.

Now that I thought of it, Grandpa once said, “The secret to a happy household is to be clever about how you end up under your wife’s thumb.” Even my grandma, who was always smiling, had given my grandpa hell when he misbehaved when they were younger.

Were Liscia and the others going to get like that eventually...? I felt like I’d seen signs of it.

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“You’re thinking something rude, aren’t you?” Liscia asked, giving me a cold look. She was apparently on to me.

“Oh, no... I was just thinking we should ask Madam Tiamat to sort out the matter with Ruby... or something like that,” I said hastily. “Yeah.”

“Hm...” Liscia looked at me with her usual dubiousness.

Uh, time to change the topic.

“Oh, right. Where’d the other dragons go? Carla was saying they were intercepting things from the ground.”

“Hm? Oh, that’s right. The dragon priestesses left a message for you.” Liscia clapped her hands as if she just remembered.

“A message?”

“‘Please, come to the great hall,’ they said. It sounds like Madam Tiamat is waiting for you there.”

“I see... Well, shall we go then?”

Madam Tiamat was waiting... huh. I had a mountain of questions, but how many of them would she answer?

We entered Crystal Castle and headed for the great hall.

“Huh?!”

En route, when we entered the corridor to the great hall, there were dragons in human form lined up along both sides of the corridor. When we approached, the dragons all took a knee and bowed their heads. They were like peasants welcoming a daimyo’s procession.

“Wh-What?! What’s going on?!” Naden exclaimed.

“All the dragons have gathered to bow to someone...” Ruby whispered.

When they saw that scene, Naden and Ruby voiced their surprise and awe. It was a familiar scene for Liscia, Aisha, and me, since we lived in a castle, but it was a bizarre sight for the rest of the group. I was scared to realize I’d gotten used to this at some point.

While I was thinking about that, a dragon priestess appeared from between the kneeling dragons. She bowed before us.

“Lady Tiamat awaits you in the great hall. Would King Souma, Princess Liscia, and their vassals please follow me?”

With that said, the dragon priestess walked down the corridor lined with kneeling dragons. Following her lead, we reached the great hall where, just as when I first arrived in the Star Dragon Mountain Range, the mountainous silver dragon that was Madam Tiamat was waiting.

The members of the group who were seeing her for the first time gulped

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in unison.

"Whoa, she's huge... Ow!" Halbert yelped.

"You have to be quiet, you know, Hal," Kaede hissed as she stepped on Hal's foot.

Then Madam Tiamat lowered her long thick neck.

When they saw that, Naden and Ruby's eyes bugged out.

"No way, Lady Tiamat is bowing!" Naden yelped.

"Wh-What a great honor!" Ruby cried.

Oh, so that was her bowing her head. She was so big that I couldn't tell.

If Madam Tiamat, who the dragons of the Star Dragon Mountain Range looked up to as a mother, and the practitioners of Mother Dragon worship saw as a god, was bowing her head in our direction, yeah, I could see why they'd be shocked. Madam Tiamat slowly lifted her head and began speaking in a quiet tone.

"First, King Souma of the United Kingdom of Elfrieden and Amidonia, as representative of those who live in the Star Dragon Mountain Range, and as the mother of all dragons, let me give you my greatest thanks for your efforts to resolve the crisis facing Dracul." Madam Tiamat bowed her head again. "Furthermore, allow me to also thank those who accompanied you for their efforts. Naden, Ruby, you did well, too."

"Y-Yes, ma'am!"

"You're too kind!"

Naden and Ruby had taken a knee and were bowing their heads.

I took a step forward, and spoke as a representative of the group. "Please, raise your head. I can't imagine this was a problem that affected your country alone. Once the thing in that cloud causing the storm finished destroying Dracul, there was no telling where it would head next. It might have harmed my own country, too. It was only natural that I should cooperate."

Then, after pausing to take a breath, I cut to the heart of the matter.

"I'd say that's enough for our pleasantries as the heads of two states, Madam Tiamat. I have a lot I want to ask you."

Tiamat, who raised her head, nodded as if in agreement. "I know. However, there is not much I am able to say."

"That's fine. You only have to tell me what you can, so please explain."

"...Okay."

With that, Madam Tiamat was engulfed in light, and she took the form of a woman wearing a silver robe, just like last time. I closed my eyes due to the

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brightness, and when I opened them, a large round table and enough chairs for everyone present had appeared.

Madam Tiamat put a hand on one of the chairs, and encouraged the rest of us to take a seat. “It must be hard to talk while looking up. Please, be seated.”

“You have a point,” I nodded.

Once I saw that everyone sat down, I asked Madam Tiamat, “Let me cut straight to the point. What was that thing in the cloud that caused the storm?”

“That is... not something I have authorization to answer.”

I knew it: the authority issue was going to get in the way. But I couldn’t just back down.

“You can just tell me what you’re able to, and if this... authorization makes it hard for you to say something, you can be vague, but give us as much information as you can.”

“Let’s see... It is, like me, one of the Old Ones.”

O-Old Ones? Old... Were they like gods, maybe?

“Each of the Old Ones has a duty,” said Tiamat. “Mine is ‘to watch over,’ its is ‘to create.’ Normally, the Old Ones are not supposed to interact, and the Old Ones are to do their utmost to avoid influencing the New Ones. However, that thing broke free of its bonds, and tried to bring harm to my children. While this is unforgivable, it also shows how badly that thing wanted to...”

“W-Wait, hold on a second.” I stopped Madam Tiamat, who was quickly going through her story.

Fair enough; I asked for as much information as she could give, and I said she could be vague where she had to, but if she was just going to keep going without us really understanding, we would only be left with no clue as to what she said. Maybe I needed to question her about the details.

Also, it would probably be best to have one of the Factory Arms I left my consciousness in back in the castle take notes so I could go over them later. I wanted to consult with Hakuya, too.

“What are the ‘Old Ones’?” I asked.

“Those with a different origin than the New Ones who live on this continent.”

“You’re one of these Old Ones, Madam Tiamat? What about the other dragons?”

“I am the only Old One in the Star Dragon Mountain Range.”

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It seemed Madam Tiamat really was a being on a different level from the rest of the dragon race.

“Are there any Old Ones other than you and the cube?” I asked.

“There were, at one time. However, that thing and I are the only ones left. The other Old Ones vanished with time, leaving their names behind as godbeasts, and other such things.”

“Did you say godbeasts?!” Aisha yelled out in surprise. “In my homeland, the God-Protected Forest, there is a legend that says a godbeast is protecting the forest.”

“That would be the forest of the dark elves in Friedonia. It’s true, there was once an Old One who took the form of a serow in that forest.”

The “once” in what Madam Tiamat said made Aisha grasp her head.

“What... am I supposed to think about this?” she burst out. “Should I be happy that it once existed? Or should I be sad that it no longer does?”

“W-Well, isn’t that what faith is like?” I asked.

“Oh... Should I tell my people the truth about this?” she asked hesitantly.

“...Let’s talk with Wodan before we decide that.”

It was a being no one claimed to have seen for a very long time, so even if it didn’t exist now, that wasn’t going to raise any problems for it as an object of worship. After all, gods were always a thing where you never knew if they were real or not, but it would be nice if they were.

But, still... Old Ones and New Ones, huh? Was it time that separated the new from the old? The flow of time in this world? If so... what did that make me, who had come from outside that time?

“No. You are neither,” Madam Tiamat said, as if to answer my doubts before I could ask.

Oh, right, Madam Tiamat could read my mind, couldn’t she?

“I thought I was human, like Liscia and the others,” I said.

“Yes. Your race is most certainly human. However, you cannot be categorized as a New One like the rest of the human race.”

“Is that because I was summoned from another world?”

“...I can find no way to answer that.”

“The cube called me a familiar one,” I said. “And you yourself once called me ‘You who have a familiar smell.’”

In that dream where our consciousnesses were synchronized, Madam Tiamat brought her nose close to my chest, and called me, “You who have a familiar smell.”

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At first, I thought it was because she was comparing me to the first King of Elfrieden, who I heard had also been a hero summoned from another world, and who had formed a contract with a dragon from the Star Dragon Mountain Range. However, that cube in the cloud also called me a “familiar one.”

That cube had no connection to the first hero.

Furthermore, Madam Tiamat and the cube, who both called me “familiar,” were also both Old Ones. I was human, but didn’t fall into the category of New One, and the Old Ones called me familiar. That meant...

“Could it be I’m an “Even Older One,” or something like that?” I put forth.

“What do you mean?” Liscia asked, so I decided to explain my hypothesis.

“I think maybe this world and the world I came from are on the same temporal axis. Basically, that would mean this isn’t a different world for me.”

“Souma’s... not a hero from another world?” Liscia mumbled with a look of shock on her face.

Everyone seemed confused by my statement, but I was more bewildered than any of them. The inside of my head was utter chaos. But it added up in a lot of ways.

“If I think back, there are a lot of connections to the world I was in before. It’s most obvious with names. Tomoe and Kaede come from my former country’s language, Japanese.”

“Th-They do?” Kaede’s eyes went wide.

I nodded and said, “Yeah. Kaede was the name of a plant that turned red in autumn. The red leaves looked pretty in the setting sun, and girls were often named after it.”

“I knew it was a common name among families with ties to the Nine-Headed Dragon Archipelago Union, but... I never knew it came from a plant.”

They were using it without knowing that? I looked at Madam Tiamat.

“Also... the one that caught my attention the most, Madam Tiamat, was your name.”

Tiamat was silent.

“I only know this from games and such, but Tiamat was the name of a dragon that appeared in old legends in my world. And, what do you know, the Mother Dragon who rules over the dragons in this world is also called

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Tiamat. If the name is so fitting, I'm not about to write it off as happenstance. Weren't you given the name Tiamat because you were the Mother Dragon?"

Madam Tiamat neither confirmed nor denied. She must not have had the authority to. If that was the case, then wasn't it because my thinking was on the mark?

Take the overscience relics from the dungeons that Genia was studying, for instance. The jewels used in the Jewel Voice Broadcast were total overtechnology from the point of view of a society whose technological level approximated the end of the middle ages, and they still were by the standards of the world I'd come from. But if this was the world of the future, there was at least some explanation for it.

However, it only raised more questions.

If I were to assume the two worlds were connected on the same timeline, what on Earth could have turned that scientific world into a world of sword and sorcery? Besides, there were more than just humans in this world. There were a variety of races: beastmen, elves, dragonewts, and more.

How were all of them born?

What exactly were this world, magic, overscience, other races, monsters, and demons...?

I didn't have one clear answer to any of it. This was no good. The matter had gotten too big to resolve inside my one, tiny little head.

"The answer to your questions may become clear in time." Madam Tiamat's quiet voice came to me as I was holding my head in confusion. "I cannot tell you everything, but if you wish to learn of this world, I am sure you will eventually find the truth."

"Is that... a prophecy?" I asked.

"No. This is a wish."

"A wish?" I asked, but Tiamat simply gave me a soft, lonely smile.

"Eventually, you will arrive at the truth, and then go north, to where that child awaits you."

Ultimately, all I'd learned from my conversation with Tiamat was that this world might be on the same timeline as my own. Even when I'd asked for more, Madam Tiamat hadn't answered.

Obviously, looking at the shape of the continent, I wasn't going to have an "It was Earth all along!" moment, but... while, when it came to that cube and how this world came about, I had to imagine the world I came from was

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involved in some way, I was left frustrated, unable to come up with a clear explanation.

Even after being led from the great hall to what seemed to be a waiting room, I was going over our conversation in my head while sitting on the comfy couch.

"Eventually, you will arrive at the truth, and then go north, to where that child awaits you."

Augh, what did she mean "the truth"? I couldn't help but let it bother me. If I didn't have a country resting on my shoulders, I'd have started flying around everywhere, looking for traces of the past world.

"Are you letting what Madam Tiamat said bother you?" Liscia asked, resting her head on my shoulder.

"...Well, yeah. It involves my origin, so I can't very well not."

"That's true. But, Souma, you're you... and you're also the king." Liscia put her hand on top of mine. "As king, you have the ability to move people. The people's literacy rate is on the rise, and you've gathered so many intelligent people to work for you. So... don't try to carry the burden all by yourself. No matter who you are, where you're from, or what happened to your world, I will accept you."

"Liscia..."

"Though, I'm also saying that selfishly, because I want you to stay as king." Liscia gave me a mischievous smile as she said that.

Aisha, who was sitting on the opposite side of Liscia, leaned in close enough that our shoulders were touching. "Indeed! No matter who you are, sire, we're with you!"

"Aisha... Thanks. Both of you."

With their encouragement, I felt like I could finally relax my shoulders a bit.

Meanwhile, Hal was sitting on the couch across from us, with a look on his face that was half exasperation and half admiration. "I'm amazed you can get such a syrupy sweet mood going with two partners, Souma."

Kaede was sitting next to him, clinging to him closely, and, for lack of other spots, Carla was sitting on the same couch, feeling a little awkward.

Halbert sighed, then started scratching his head. "For me... it still doesn't feel real that I'm taking Ruby as my bride. I mean, sure, political marriages are normal in the noble and knightly classes, but I already have Kaede. We were childhood friends, and... well... I wanted to make her my wife,

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eventually."

Is he going to brag about her? I thought, but I stayed quiet and listened.

"But now I've gone and decided on a second wife."

"Oh... I'm happy for you, Hal," I said. "I'm glad Madam Tiamat accepted the situation with you and Ruby."

At the very end of the earlier conference, I apologized to Madam Tiamat for the fact that Hal rode on an unwed dragon like Ruby. Even though it ultimately was to Dracul's advantage, it was something my subordinate had done without sufficient thought, so I gave a proper apology to prevent a diplomatic incident.

Madam Tiamat smiled at Hal and Ruby. "I am sure this bond was also fate." Then she lowered her head for Hal, too. "Sir Halbert. I leave Ruby in your care, until the day you die."

When the being worshiped as Mother Dragon bowed her head to him, Hal reflexively stood up from his chair and responded, "Y-Yes, ma'am!" with a tense look on his face.

Thinking back to that moment, I put on a wry smile and said, "*The* Tiamat bowed her head to you. You'd better make Ruby happy."

"About that..." Hal held his head in his hands. "I never thought it would come to this, so I have no clue how to interact with them. Should I accept it as a political marriage? Should I love them equally? Once I start thinking, 'Isn't that unfair to Kaede?' or 'Isn't that unfair to Ruby?' there's no end to it."

"Do you hate the idea of marrying Ruby?" I asked.

"If I hated it, it wouldn't be bothering me so badly!"

Hal was, at his core, a simple and devoted guy, so he must have found it hard to come to terms with the idea of loving two women. It made me, the guy with five fiancées, feel pretty bad about myself.

When I looked at Kaede, wondering how she felt about how Hal, she had a hand to her mouth and was shaking. It looked like she was stifling a laugh. It was funny that Hal was wracking his nonexistent brains and worrying over something Kaede had already come to terms with.

I'd feel bad for Ruby if he kept that depressed look on his face, so I decided to try blowing things up a bit.

"Hal, do you know you're a meathead?"

"Huh? Yeah, I'm aware, but when you say it that bluntly, it pisses me off." Sure enough, he looked angry.

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I sighed and told him, “Poor thought is akin to no thought. With your brains, you’re not going to come up with anything decent, so don’t waste your time thinking. Also, one thing is clear: While you’re being indecisive about what to do, you aren’t making either Kaede or Ruby any happier.”

“Urkh...”

“Besides, you’re more of a doer than a thinker, right? If you have time to worry about if you’re being insincere, use it to show the two of them some sincerity.”

“Don’t worry and show them with my attitude, huh... You’re right.” With that, Hal stood up, scooping Kaede up in his arms.

“Eek!”

“It’s not like me to waste time mulling things over,” he said. “I may not have really come to terms with it all yet, but I’m gonna do everything I can to make both Kaede and Ruby happy.”

That was the simplemi... er, sincere Hal for you. Once he decided not to think too much, he found his resolve. It was pretty cool that he could scoop her up in his arms and then say a passionate line like that while sober. Kaede’s face was bright red, too.

“Okay... then. Please, do your best, you know, Hal...”

With how embarrassed she was, it seemed that was all Kaede could force out.

Haha, looks like Hal got back at her, I thought and was smiling, but then...

“Since you said it, you do your best, too, Souma.” Liscia grinned.

“Oh! Oh! Sire! The princess and I would like to be carried, too!” Aisha added.

Getting that from both sides, I shrunk into myself.

Then...

A dragon priestess suddenly appeared and told us, “Sir Souma, Sir Halbert, the preparations are complete.”

“Souma, this is her big day, so keep your act together, okay?” Liscia said.

“Go for it, sire!” Aisha cried, sending me off.

“You, too, Hal,” Kaede added. “Don’t disgrace the House of Magna.”

“What, no kind words for me?!”

Kaede sent Hal off, too. She was like a wife in the Edo Period, sending off her husband by striking a firestone so that the sparks fell on his back.

Now, then... it was time to go. Naden and Ruby were waiting.

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There were two reasons why I came to the Star Dragon Mountain Range.

The first was Madam Tiamat's request to help deal with the storm bearing down on the Star Dragon Mountain Range. The other was to form a dragon knight contract, binding Naden, the one who could fly in that storm, and me together. For that reason, I had been asked to participate in the Contract Ceremony which was held between the dragon knights of the Nothung Dragon Knight Kingdom and the dragons of the Star Dragon Mountain Range.

However, because events developed so quickly, the order of events had gotten all mixed up, and with the earlier storm having caused damage in Dracul, due to flooding, among other things, the Contract Ceremony that the Nothung Dragon Knight Kingdom would have been invited to was canceled. Even so, Naden and I, and Ruby and Halbert, had already essentially formed contracts. That was why it was decided that a Contract Ceremony would be held today with just us two couples.

When Hal and I were transported to the great hall, Madam Tiamat was already there in dragon form, and we were surrounded by dragons in human form. Naden's friend Pai and Ruby's former flunkies Sapphire and Emerada were there, too.

While we were still nervous, having been cast into the center of attention, Naden and Ruby appeared wearing a black and a red dress, respectively.

Ruby was a beautiful girl to begin with, but Naden was given a makeover by Liscia, so she shone just as brightly. The dresses looked like they'd been interwoven with metallic fiber, and the contrast between Naden's black and Ruby's red was stunning.

Meanwhile, Hal and I were in our usual military outfits. Mine was black, and Hal's was green.

They walked over to us, took a knee, and brought their left hands to their chests while reaching out to us with their right hands.

Ruby was the first to open her mouth.

"My knight, my partner. I wish to form a riding contract with you."

Hal inhaled sharply. "Accepted!" He took her hand, pulling her to her feet.

I heard this from Naden later, but the order contracts were formed in was decided by the status of the people becoming dragon knights. The highest ranked knight was saved for last, and after that it went in order of rank. That was why Naden went last, but with only two couples present, it didn't really

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feel all that special being saved for that.

Well, that aside, next, Naden opened her mouth.

“My *king,* my partner. I wish to form a riding contract with you.”

“I accept.” I took Naden’s hand, pulling her to her feet.

I was surprised when she called me her king, but she was right; I wasn’t a knight, I was the king of a nation.

Once she was standing, Naden and I clasped both our hands together. We were in the perfect pose for high society dancing. At the same moment, music began playing in the great hall. Quietly at first, but gradually growing louder. The dragon priestesses in front of Madam Tiamat had started playing musical instruments. It was a slow rhythm, a relaxed melody.

“Huh?!” I exclaimed. “This piece...”

“What is it, Souma?” Naden asked.

“...No, nothing.”

I began stepping in time to the music.

I danced with Naden, matching the melody. Hal and Ruby started dancing, too.

As we danced, I leaned in and whispered in Naden’s ear, “Do they always use this piece for the dance at the Contract Ceremony?”

“I don’t think so. I’ve never heard this piece before.”

“I see...”

In that case, Madam Tiamat may have arranged this. The piece they were playing was one that had come from my world. It was the main theme from a movie where a beauty danced with a beast. Naden and I danced to the famous piece that played during the dance scene that was the highlight of the film.

Seeing Naden’s face up close, it made me wonder: Which of us was the beauty, and which of us was the beast? If you saw this as a human-animal marriage tale, as a ryuu, that would make Naden the beast, but she also deserved to be called a beauty. The girl in front of my eyes was truly a beautiful beast.

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“What a fancy dance partner I have...” I murmured.

“Hm? Did you say something?”

“No, nothing. I was just thinking how lucky I am.”

While we were dancing, I looked over to see Hal and Ruby. Hal must not have been used to this sort of thing, because his moves were a little awkward, but Ruby was doing a good job of leading him.

“You can actually dance, Souma,” Naden said to me. “I thought you’d be bad at this sort of thing.”

“I was, but I worked desperately to learn how to get better. I was being called to a lot of social functions, after all.”

“Ahaha! You’ve got it rough, huh.”

“Yeah, kinda. For all the practice you skipped, you’re doing pretty well yourself, Naden.”

“I-I only started skipping recently. I was practicing like I was supposed to before.”

I looked fondly at Naden as she made excuses, when...

“Naden.” Madam Tiamat’s voice suddenly came into my head.

“Lady Tiamat?” It seemed Naden could hear the voice, too.

Oh, yeah. She’d been calling Naden, so of course she could.

While we continued dancing, Madam Tiamat’s gentle voice echoed in our heads. “Naden. There’s something I have to apologize to you for.”

“Huh? Apologize?”

“When you were troubled by the fact you looked different from other dragons, I was unable to tell you, ‘You are a ryuu.’ That you were born in this era meant that one who knew your value would appear. I hid your nature so as to not get in the way of that meeting, and for that I apologize.”

“Don’t!”

While still dancing, Naden turned just her face toward Madam Tiamat. The music was already past the midway point, and was rising. Our emotions rose along with the melody.

Naden shouted, with tears in her eyes, “You were always there to encourage me, Lady Tiamat! *‘Eventually, one who knows your value will appear,’* you said! When I heard it, I only half believed it... No, I hardly believed it at all... But I really did meet Souma!”

Big teardrops rolled down Naden’s face.

“So... I’m grateful. Thanks... ‘Mom.’”

It felt like Madam Tiamat smiled when she heard Naden’s words of

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gratitude. “Take care, my beloved daughter.”

The music was close to ending. I held Naden, whose face was messy with tears, close.

“Naden, I know I’m not the most reliable guy, but let’s work together from now on.”

Naden sobbed. “Yes. Yes!”

Here, today, Naden and I formed a contract as partners.

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Midword

Thank you for buying volume six of *Realist Hero.* This is Dojyomaru, and I feel that, while there are far more dragon-inspired mechs, a lot of ryuu-inspired mechs, like Denshi Seijuu Doru and Ryuseiou, are cool, too.

I have a lot I want to say this time, so I got three pages to do so. I'll be explaining things that include spoilers for this volume, so I recommend not reading this section until you've finished the main story.

With this volume, the fifth fiancée, Naden the black ryuu, has finally joined Souma's family.

While she was the only ryuu living among dragons, Naden is an ordinary girl, with a personality a lot like those in the world Souma came from. I wanted to bring out the feeling that she was a girl in love with love, and I think she came out feeling very much like a young maiden. I hope she'll be well loved.

Also, this volume showed the connection between the world Souma came from and Liscia and the others' world. In short, it hinted that this might not be another world. If so, then what are magic, different races, demons, and monsters to this world? I'd like to gradually reveal that as the story progresses. It's as strange a story as ever, huh.

Normally, if you start with a world of sword and sorcery, you build your story on top of that platform; but in this story, we'll be discussing why it became a world of sword and sorcery in the first place. That may sound pedantic, but I think it's what gives this story its "individuality."

I talked about individuality and universality in the main story, as well. Souma likened it to the exam wars, but I feel it applies most strongly to the creation of literature. If what you make is too bizarre, no one is going to accept it or pay it any attention. However, when it comes to material that is easily accepted by everyone, formulas and templates have already been established, and you'll be buried in similar works.

While working with subject matter that will be accepted by a large number of people, even though it may be not accessible to everyone, I want

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to find some way to inject myself and differentiate it from other works. It's that gap that writers (though maybe not just writers) struggle through repeated trial and error to find.

If there's one more thing I have to say, it's about the manga adaptation by Satoshi Ueda being released at the same time as this volume. Every time I see the rough draft of a chapter, I'm overwhelmed by the quality of the art. He's done a good job summarizing things I explained at length in the novel. I have to give him credit, and say that if you want to review past events, you should go read the manga adaptation.

Thank you, Mr. Ueda. Please keep working with this novel.

Now, as for the continuation of this story... you can read it. I've put everything after the Star Dragon Mountain Range arc on Pixiv. You can read about four volumes ahead there. I questioned whether it was okay to announce this, but my editor said, "Sure, why not? It works as advertising," and didn't think it was a big deal.

For those of you who are interested, search on Pixiv using the keyword どぜう丸. You'll know you've found it by the Little Musashibo icon. But the Pixiv version is split up into a lot of small parts, so for those who want to read things all in one go, I recommend waiting for the published volumes.

In my case, I do a lot of rewriting and additions for the published volumes, so it would be good if you could keep buying them, too.

Let me say this definitively: Whatever the web novel version says, what's in the published volumes is "canon."

I've gone on for a while now, so let me wrap this up.

I give my thanks to Fuyuyuki for always providing such wonderful character designs, to Satoshi Ueda for the excellent manga adaptation, to my editor, the designers, the proofreaders, and everyone who now holds this book in their hands.

This has been Dojyomaru.

This midword will be followed by three short stories about what those left behind in the kingdom got up to during this volume. I considered fitting them in where they go chronologically, but decided it was better to read straight through the main story, so that's why the book is organized this way.

In terms of timeline, Side Story 1 happens just before Souma and Naden make their short trip back; Side Story 2 happens while Souma, Liscia, and the rest have gone to confront the storm; and Side Story 3 happens when everything is over, and they've gotten back to the kingdom. There's a second

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epilogue after them to lead into the next volume.

To be completely honest, Side Story 3 actually takes place right after Epilogue 2.

I hope you will read all the way to the end.

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Side Story 1: The Ambassador's Return

In the far west of the Gran Chaos Empire was the capital, Valois. It was larger in scale than the capital of the Kingdom of Friedonia, and atop the neighboring hill was the residence of the dignified Empress Maria, Valois Castle.

Because it stood atop a mountain, it was difficult for an enemy to attack, but it had been built with too much of a focus on design to really call it functional. It was said this was to demonstrate to other countries that they were the largest and most powerful among the nations of mankind.

In one room of Valois Castle, the office of Jeanne Euphoria, a man and woman were sitting across from each other.

The one at the desk was Jeanne, the master of this room and a general who was also the younger sister of Empress Maria. Before her stood the ambassador dispatched from Friedonia to reside in the Empire, Piltory Saracen.

Jeanne spoke. "Oh, right. You were set to return today, weren't you?"

"Yes." Piltory saluted. "For my wife's sake, I will be taking a temporary leave of absence."

Piltory was sent to be the resident ambassador to the Empire, but before leaving, he had taken the two beautiful sister slaves, Anzu and Shiho, to be his wives, and brought them to the Empire with him. He'd gotten them from Ginger, who was still a slave trader at the time.

Eventually the elder sister, Anzu, had gotten pregnant. It was decided that, rather than give birth in an unfamiliar country, she would be better off giving birth at the home of Piltory's family, the House of Saracen.

In order to deliver Anzu back to the kingdom, Piltory would return for a time, then immediately return once he left her in his family's care.

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Piltory said, “In my absence, Shiho will remain here to serve as your liaison with the kingdom.”

“I’m sorry,” said Jeanne. “I’m sure your wife would prefer to go with you, too.”

“No... My wife understands the importance of my duties.”

There was a secret alliance between the kingdom and the Empire. The permanent ambassadors who served as liaisons were indispensable to both sides, and it was a secret that was known only to a select few.

Ever since the kingdom and the Empire formed their secret pact, they had a system in place that allowed them to use the Jewel Voice Broadcast and simple receivers to hold the equivalent of teleconferences at any time.

For critical matters, Souma and Maria would hold talks personally, but for matters of lesser importance (such as the exchange of information), their intermediaries, Hakuya and Jeanne, would talk instead. Piltory’s role was primarily to schedule their meetings.

“Oh, right,” said Jeanne. “Since you’ll be returning to your country, I wanted to ask a favor of you...”

“A favor?”

Jeanne opened a drawer in her desk, and pulled out a pretty wooden box of some sort. “Please, give this to Sir Hakuya, your Prime Minister.”

With that, Jeanne opened the box. Inside was an expensive looking bottle of wine with a fancy label, packed with wood chips that were likely intended to absorb any impacts.

“I happened to obtain two fine bottles of wine, so I thought I would send one to him.”

“This is for the prime minister?” Piltory asked.

“It’s not poisoned, I assure you. If you’re concerned, you can have a poison taster test it.”

“Oh, no! It’s not that we suspect you of that!”

While watching Piltory rush to apologize, Jeanne let out a jolly laugh. “Hahaha! I know that. The second-in-command of the Empire is sending a gift to the second-in-command of the kingdom. I can understand why you might want to probe my intentions. But this is just a small thanks to Sir Hakuya for always listening to me complain about my sister.”

“O-Oh... If that’s all...”

When Piltory accepted the bottle, that was when it happened.

There was a sudden rush of footsteps outside the room, and then the

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doors to the office were thrown open with a loud bang. The woman who had barged into the room held a red dress in one hand and a blue dress in the other. It was none other than the empress of this nation, Maria Euphoria.

"Hey, Jeanne! Which dress do you think would be better for today's broadcast?" Maria cried. She thrust both dresses out toward her sister.

Those dresses were both frilly, had short skirts, exposed the belly, and accentuated the chest. The kind that, if Souma were to see them, would make him say, "Serious idol costumes?" and tilt his head in confusion.

Jeanne pounded her hands on the desk. "Sister! I'm seeing a visitor!"

"Oh, my. If it isn't Sir Piltory. Welcome," Maria said with a soft smile, unperturbed by Jeanne's shouting.

Faced with the sudden appearance of the Empire's head of state, Piltory's mind locked up for a moment, but when he came to his senses, he stood up straight and saluted her.

"Yes, Your Imperial Majesty! It is my most humble pleasure... to find myself in your... esteemed company?"

Having encountered the bizarre intrusion of an empress carrying two idol dresses, Piltory's response was a mess, and delivered with too many pauses.

Seeing Piltory's reaction, Maria giggled and smiled. "No need to be so tense. You're one of Sir Souma's vassals, so you don't have to be so formal with me. Come on, relax, relax."

With that said, Maria gave him a smile that would make the heart of anyone who saw it melt.

Meanwhile, Jeanne had a look on her face like she just bit into something unpleasant. "You're too lax! What does the empress of this nation think she's doing, running through the halls carrying such gaudy outfits!"

"Oh, but this is work I'm doing for the people, you know?" Maria said with a teasing smile. "It's for the broadcast of entertainment programs using the Jewel Voice Broadcast. Providing a moment of rest to the people who work so hard every day... I think it's a wonderful idea that Sir Souma's come up with."

Hearing the master he served being complimented, Piltory stood up straight once again. "I-I'm glad to hear that."

Jeanne, on the other hand, pressed on her forehead, shaking her head as if to say, "Oh, good grief..."

"Even if that's true, surely there's no need for you to become a lorelei yourself."

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“But there were a large number of requests for me to sing, weren’t there?” Maria asked.

“Well... yes, but...”

The concept of a lorelei was something Souma brought to this world. To explain quickly, what was called an idol on Earth was called a lorelei here.

Now, if you were to ask what an idol needs, it would be a pretty face and charisma. Singing and dancing ability were nice to have, too, but if someone had an above average appearance (this had to be categorized as a natural gift), and the charm to draw people in, that was enough to be an idol.

Now, if you were to ask who in the Empire had the prettiest face and the greatest charisma, the first response you would get, without a doubt, would have been Maria Euphoria. And Maria was an accomplished singer and dancer, too, so she was so overflowing with potential that even becoming a top class idol could be more than just a dream for her. Her talent even rivaled Juna’s.

Because of that, there were many requests from the people to hear her sing, and recently Maria’s popular name, “the Saint of the Empire,” started to have “Singing and Dancing” added to it.

“They call you the Singing and Dancing Saint of the Empire...” Jeanne said in exasperation. “Are you okay with that?!”

“As far as I’m concerned, the ‘Saint’ part is the one I could do without. If I have to be called something, I’d like it to be the Singing and Dancing Empress Maria.”

“This isn’t a matter of taste, you know...” Jeanne slumped her shoulders.

While looking at Jeanne, *Oh, I see. So these are the sorts of things the prime minister listens to her vent about...* Piltory thought, finding himself oddly satisfied with that answer.

—Some days later, around the time Souma was taken to the Star Dragon Mountain Range—

Piltory was back in Parnam, the capital of the Kingdom of Friedonia, inside Prime Minister Hakuya Kwonmin’s study at Parnam Castle.

Having left his pregnant wife Anzu with his family, he had come to the castle for a courtesy call before returning to the Empire. However, right now, it turned out Souma was on a diplomatic visit to the Star Dragon Mountain Range, so he had come to visit Hakuya, who was taking care of things in Souma’s absence.

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Piltory stood in front of the desk where Hakuya was seated with a salute. “Now then, Prime Minister, I will be departing for the Empire once more.”

“Thank you for your service. Though, I’m sure you would rather be at your wife’s side...” Hakuya said with an expression that betrayed little emotion.

It may have sounded curt, but Hakuya was the one who recommended he return to the kingdom when he learned his wife was pregnant in the first place.

Souma had been addressing the issue of urban hygiene, and was currently carrying out medical reforms centered around Hilde and Brad, so this country had now become “the best country on the continent to give birth in.”

Hakuya also arranged for Hilde and her people to look at the pregnant Anzu. What was more, he also considerately provided transportation by wyvern gondola to and from the new city, Venetinova, where Hilde was.

So even if he was curt, Hakuya was treating him well, and Piltory was thankful for that.

“No... I’m well aware of the importance of my duties,” replied Piltory, thinking, *I had a similar conversation with Madam Jeanne just the other day.*

Then Hakuya rose from his seat and headed over to a shelf. He took a wooden box from it, placing it on the desk. “Since you’ll be traveling to the Empire, I have an item I’d like delivered to Madam Jeanne.”

“You want something delivered?” Piltory tilted his head to the side questioningly.

Hakuya opened the box’s lid. Inside, there was an expensive looking glass with striking designs carved into it.

There was a hole next to the glass into which another glass of the same type would fit, showing that this glass was one of a two-glass set. I received a fine wine the other day, so I’m sending this gift in return. It is my small token of appreciation to Madam Jeanne for always listening to me complain about His Majesty.”

“Complaining... You, too, Prime Minister?”

Jeanne said she complained to Hakuya about her elder sister. Was Hakuya complaining to Jeanne, too?

While Piltory was pondering that, there was a rush of footsteps down the hall, then a perfunctory knock before the door to the room was thrown open. The one who came in was the daughter of the former king, and the candidate to become Souma’s first primary queen.

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When she came into the room, Princess Liscia paid no attention to Piltory as she hurriedly handed a letter to Hakuya. “Hakuya, we got another messenger kui from Carla! ‘It will be difficult for the three of us to stop the target! Requesting immediate backup!’ it says!”

“Urgh... Again?” Hakuya’s cool expression slipped slightly. “Very well. I’d rather not increase the number of witnesses, so I can’t send reinforcements, but I will have the National Defense Force work to seal off the area. I’ll place a gag order on the region, too. If this goes any further... it could lead to poor opinions of the future second primary queen, after all.”

“I’ll leave that to you.” With that, Princess Liscia left the room as fast as she had come.

As Hakuya put a hand on his head, and leaned back in his chair, Piltory hesitantly asked, “Um... What happened?”

Hakuya gave him a dry smile. “Oh, nothing... Just another thing I can complain to Mama Jeanne about.”

From the way he said it, there had likely been some problem involving King Souma.

Piltory had a sort of premonition.

Sometime in the near future, Hakuya and Jeanne would be drinking the same brand of wine, from identical glasses, together through their Jewel Voice Broadcast screens. They would commence complaints about their respective masters, Souma and Maria, to go with the drink.

Piltory imagined that scene as he returned to the Empire.

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Side Story 2: Nameless Heroes

Every evening in the Kingdom of Friedonia, a number of variety programs aired on the Jewel Voice Broadcast.

Depending on the day, it may be a singing program, or a serialized drama, a performance program centered around comedy and tricks, but all of them had a firm grip on the people's hearts. With the high praise those programs received from the people of the kingdom, the number of fixed broadcaster receivers kept rising. Now they were even placed in small towns, and in the large cities there were multiple installations, increasing the number of places where people could watch. There were no means of recording, and all broadcasts were live, so there was a lack of freedom there, but broadcasts had taken solid root as part of this country's culture.

Out of all those broadcast programs, there was a documentary drama currently on that had become a hit with the people.

The name of the program was *Nameless Heroes.*

[*Nameless Heroes* Episode 3: The Closers of the Gap]

What set this drama apart was the black curtain set up at the back of the screen.

Because the Jewel Voice Broadcast still only allowed for live broadcasts, drama programs involved the actors acting out the scripts the moment the broadcast began. Because of that, it was normal to have a proper set (backdrops, and such) behind the performing actors, to make it feel as little like a play as possible; but this drama was shot in front of a black curtain.

The other thing that stood out was that the characters all wore black hoods like the kuroko stagehands in a kabuki production. This, despite them wearing outfits appropriate to their role from the neck down.

Now, as for the effect this had: In combination with the black curtain, it

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made them appear to have no faces. Because it was a thin black cloth in front of their faces, the actors could see well enough to act, but the viewers watching the broadcast couldn't see the actors' faces.

I believe you will see why this manner of presentation was used as we watch the program.

Now then, on the stage for today's drama there was a scene overflowing with the sorts of things seen in an experimental laboratory.

There were two young researchers, a man and a woman, wearing white coats, who were using a set of balance scales to measure out an amount of powder, or peering up into a round-bottomed flask being heated with an alcohol burner.

"Oh, geez!" The male researcher who had been measuring with the scales pounded on the table.

"Hey, Toto, those chemicals are dangerous, so don't go shaking things," the female researcher said critically when she saw how her junior colleague was behaving.

The male researcher she called Toto wasn't done being angry yet. "But, Momo! When we graduated from the Royal Academy, we entered Cosno Labs out of a passionate drive to develop something that will help the people of this country! Like Madam Genia of the House of Maxwell does! And yet... the work that comes our way is always just to 'research her research'..."

Unable to refute his words, the female researcher called Momo sighed. "...It's true, Genia has produced a lot of incredible inventions. But didn't Dr. Mattis always say that basic research is just as important?"

"Yeah, see, I can't accept that!" Toto's knuckles were white with frustration. "Dr. Mattis is a great researcher! A great researcher who's produced results with slow, steady progress... but the only one who gets public praise is Genia, for her string of eccentric inventions!"

"...Yeah," Momo said. "Well, I can understand the feeling..."

"Were you talking about me?" While the two were talking, an elderly male researcher appeared.

This person was also wearing a black hood. In order to bring across the idea that he was elderly when the audience couldn't see his face, he wore his white coat a little more loosely than Toto or Momo, as if he was used to it, and he was wearing worn-out shoes, too.

""Dr. Mattis!"" Toto and Momo cried out in unison.

This man was the chief researcher of this lab, Mattis Cosno.

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Seeing the two of them stand bolt upright, Mattis laughed. “Please, don’t praise me so highly, Toto. I know better than anyone that Madam Genia’s imagination is far greater than my own. It suits me better to slowly build upon my studies, rather than come up with revolutionary ideas like hers.”

“But, Doctor!”

Toto was about to say more, but Mattis held up a hand to stop him.

“You want ‘to develop something that will help the people of this country.’ You just said that, didn’t you? The greatest wish of researchers and engineers is, and ever shall be, to create the things that will make tomorrow better than today. I can’t say we don’t want to be praised for what we do, but it’s not our primary motivation.”

“Doctor...”

“Now, if you understand that, let’s work hard on our research again today. I hear we’ve just received another object of research from the capital.” With that, Mattis placed some sort of lump on the table.

Looking at the reddish-black object that was kind of like a brick, Momo furrowed her brow. “What is it, Doctor?”

“This, here, is a shock-absorbing material.”

“Shock-absorbing material?”

“Yes. When His Majesty asked Madam Genia, ‘I’d like you to develop a system for reducing the amount of shaking on the rhinoceros train,’ she came up with the idea of using these sorts of shock-absorbing materials on the wheels.

“Madam Genia again, huh...” Toto’s voice had a displeased tone, but Mattis laughed it off.

“That’s the researcher from the House of Maxwell for you. Keen insight, as always... However, because this shock-absorbing material uses the flesh from the inside of the giganto armadillo’s hard armor shell, it can’t be mass-produced. It is hoped that the rhinoceros trains will develop as a means of shipping freight, and of travel for the people. But without the ability to mass-produce them, they’re meaningless. The research request we received was to develop a viable alternative for this material.”

It might seem like he was overexplaining things, but the fact was that Mattis’s lines were explaining things to the viewer.

Momo banged on the shock-absorbing material. “It’s awfully hard, isn’t it?” she commented.

“With that level of force, you aren’t going to do anything to a lump of

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this stuff," said Mattis. "More than that, if a powerful force is exerted on it, it will change form to disperse the shock. In other words, the important properties of this material are toughness and elasticity."

"Tough, but elastic... Wait, isn't that contradictory?" Toto exclaimed.

Mattis laughed. "Contradictory or not, we're looking at it. The task entrusted to us is to find a mass-producible alternative to this material. I'll be counting on you two for your help."

""Yes, Doctor!""

With that, all the members of Cosno Labs (though, for the purposes of this play, there were only three actors) searched for a material that could be used as a replacement for this shock-absorbent material. However, they tried every material they could think of, and still couldn't find it.

Tough, but possessing elasticity. If they tested things with toughness, they lacked elasticity, and didn't function as shock absorbers. If they tested things with elasticity, they might function as shock absorbers, but they quickly broke.

These were parts to be used on freight and passenger cars drawn by massive rhinoceroses. If they failed one in a thousand, or even one in a million times, it would be a great tragedy. Because of that, they had to choose the materials carefully and strictly.

The three of them gradually showed greater and greater signs of fatigue.

There was a fade to black, and when the lights returned to the stage, Toto collapsed on his desk. "It's hopeless! We just can't find a material that's both tough and elastic!"

"Yeah," Momo said with a sigh, putting a hand on Toto's back. "I'm starting to think it was a miracle that this material was found in the first place."

Seeing the two of them so exhausted, Mattis let out a wry laugh and tried to encourage them. "Now, now, there's no need to be in such a hurry. If you push yourselves too hard, you're not going to come up with good ideas. Let's try having a hot cup of milk, okay?"

With that, Mattis rose from his seat... and it happened.

"Hm? ...Whoa?! D-Doctor!" Toto shouted and suddenly fell out of his chair.

"Wh-What's gotten into you, Toto?!" Momo cried.

"Is something the matter?" Mattis asked.

When Momo and Mattis came over next to him, Toto was pointing in one

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direction, seeming frightened somehow. What he was pointing at, incredibly, was a pen that had fallen to the floor, and was seemingly floating in midair. The other two were flabbergasted.

"No way... Is this magic?" Momo asked.

"No, we shouldn't have any mages in this lab who can use gravity manipulation magic," said Mattis.

"B-But, Doctor, that pen is floating as we speak!"

"Hm... But the way it floats is strange. As if it's been caught by something."

With that said, Mattis got closer, and passed his hand over the top of the pen. When he did, the pen moved with his right hand, as if it were attached to the bottom of it.

""Huh?!""

"I see... So that's it."

While the two researchers were reacting with surprise, Mattis nodded sagely. Then, grasping the floating pen with his left hand, he had them take a good, close look at the space between the bottom of his hand and the pen.

"Look closely. Don't you see something in between?"

"...Ah! It's very fine, but I do see something like a thread!"

"Hey, you're right! It's super thin, but there is a thread!"

Hearing the two of them say that, Mattis smiled and nodded. "Precisely. This is a spider's thread. If I were to guess, I'd say that the falling pen got stuck to a strand of spider silk hanging from the desk.

"O-Oh... It surprised me..." Toto collapsed and exhausted to the ground. "But a spider's silk is amazing, you know. Even though it's so thin, it can hold up a pen."

"I know, right? Even though it's so soft, too."

"...Ah!" Mattis acted as though a jolt of electricity had rushed through his head.

They had been working with objects with a fixed shape up until this point, but what about this thread? Spider silk was tough, but also elastic. What if they were to try hardening it?

Fortunately, this world had all sorts of spiders, large and small, and there were other creatures that produced silk, too. If they could find a viable candidate for the shock-absorbing material from one of them, it might be possible to mass-produce.

"We've found it! We've found it at last!"

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As Mattis shouted that, the screen faded to black.

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When the stage lit up again, the scenery had changed.

They were in a place that looked like a reception room, with two people sitting on chairs facing each other.

This time, the two people weren't actors, and both their faces were visible.

One was Juna Doma, who was known widely as the Prima Lorelei, who recently took up singing for children on the educational program.

The other was a relaxed man in his forties who was wearing a white coat. He had a bushy gray mustache that matched his hair. This was the real (not played by an actor) Head Researcher, Mattis Cosno.

Juna held a black lump in her hands and asked Mattis, "So, after that, you created this shock-resistant material, right?"

"Exactly. When we tested the silk produced by a variety of creatures, a certain type of silkworm's was found to be the most suitable. That would be what you're holding there," Mattis responded confidently.

Now, the dialogue segment with these two began.

The earlier drama had been a reenactment of events. This documentary drama, *Nameless Heroes,* had a two-segment format. First, the achievements of the person being focused on in that episode (in this case, Mattis) would be explained with a reenactment, and then the person in question would have a dialogue with Juna.

"Now then, Mattis," Juna said. "Is it possible to mass-produce this material?"

"Yes. It uses the cocoons of silkworms as its base material, so mass-production is possible, just like with silk. However, it responds poorly to heat and flames, so we apply an anti-fire, anti-heat process to it as part of the processing. As for the method... That's considered a national secret."

"I see. Cutting-edge technology is a national treasure, after all. Honestly... I think you've made something wonderful here. His Majesty must have been very pleased."

"Yes," said Mattis. "When I was summoned to the castle, I wondered what it might be about, but I was then praised for my work in developing this material. It's not common for us researchers to see recognition for our work,

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but that time... Yes. I'm glad to have done the work on this."

Hearing Mattis sum things up, Juna bowed her head. "Thank you for taking the time to have this important talk with us today, Doctor."

Mattis was hooked by that into bowing himself.

When Juna raised her head, she turned to the Jewel Voice Broadcast jewel and said, "Now then, we will have a reenactment of the time when Mattis met His Majesty, King Souma, and then close out this program."

When Juna said that, the screen faded to black again.

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"Good work, Big Sister Juna," said Roroa.

When the broadcast was finished, Juna said her goodbyes to Mattis, then headed off stage to a spot where the broadcast jewel wouldn't show her. She was greeted there by a smiling Roroa.

Juna returned the smile with one of her own. "Thank you, Roroa. How was I?"

"Ya did good. It's a cryin' shame we couldn't let Darlin' and Big Sister Cia see it."

Souma and Liscia had currently left for the Star Dragon Mountain Range with Naden. They were apparently going to confront a "storm" that was about to hit the Star Dragon Mountain Range.

Roroa and Juna were worried about Souma and the rest, of course, but these two who had been left behind in the kingdom had their own things to do, and they would hold down the fort while Souma and the rest were away. This program that she embarked on in that spirit had turned out to Juna's satisfaction.

It seemed Roroa was disappointed about one thing, though. "Oh, but the guy playin' Darlin' who came out at the end? I wasn't so keen on him."

Roroa was talking about the "Souma" who appeared in the final reenactment scene, calling out Mattis and his team to shake their hands one by one, and to praise them for developing a mass-producible shock-absorbing material.

Roroa crossed her arms and said, "That actor, he was wearin' a crown, he had a fancy cape on, and he was holdin' a scepter in his gloved hands, ya know? I ain't never seen Darlin' in a getup like that."

"That was, well... to make it easy to understand."

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The coronation ceremony had yet to happen, so the former king Albert was still holding onto the crown, and Souma didn't like capes and scepters. That said, if the actor had worn Souma's usual casual outfit of a shirt and pants, it would be hard to think of it as a scene about an audience with a king.

"Ya got a point," Roroa said with a laugh. "Still, this *Nameless Heroes* program's lookin' mighty popular."

"I think, for the common people, it must be easier to identify with a highly capable craftsman like Sir Mattis than it is to identify with a true genius like Madam Genia," said Juna.

Normal people had an easier time empathizing with those who came by their gifts through hard work, rather than those who had natural talent.

"Well, I think it's a good thing," said Roroa. "When ya look at Darlin's policies, it feels like they were all made possible by a small group of geniuses, but the public should know there're actually these sorts of 'Nameless Heroes' workin' behind the scenes, too."

"Yes. I think you're absolutely right."

I hope the people get it, they both thought, looking at one another with a smile.

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Side Story 3: Genia and Merula's "Let's Test it!"

"It's time for Genia..."

"...a-and Merula's..."

""*...Let's Test It!*""

The two who shouted this and pumped their fists into the air were overscientist Genia, who had just gotten engaged to Ludwin Arcs, the Captain of the Royal Guard, the other day; and Merula Merlin, from the Spirit Kingdom of Garlan, the high elf whose too-strong curiosity had gotten her accused as a witch, and put her on the run from the Orthodox Papal State of Lunaria.

The two of them were now in the ruined dungeon workshop owned by the House of Maxwell.

"...Um, was there some meaning behind that call?" Merula asked Genia, her pale face having turned red.

"Huh? It was obviously just a spur-of-the-moment thing."

"Spur-of-the-moment...? Now, listen, Genia..."

"C'mon, Merumeru. Time's finite. Let's get to testing!"

"Please, don't call me Merumeru!"

Ignoring Merula's protests, Genia pulled something out from behind her. It was a squalid bag, about the size of a sandbag used in boxing practice.

"This here is the item up for testing today," Genia declared. "Dun-du-du-duuun: the Hero's Sack."

"The Hero's Sack?"

"This sack was said to be used by the first King of Elfrieden, who, just like our king (Souma), was summoned from another world as a hero. It may not look like much, but it can hold a lot, and recently Sir Poncho's been using it to store the ingredients he gathers all over the continent and brings them

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back.”

“The first king... Wait, isn’t this a real treasure?” Merula asked, poking at the sack.

If this was the first King of Elfrieden they were talking about, he was a great hero who united the many races to form this kingdom. His story was told of in legend, and he was still loved and respected by the people. If the first king had used this, it was probably an incredibly prized possession.

“It’s technically a national treasure, yeah,” Genia said like it was no big deal.

“N-National treasure?!” Merula jumped back in surprise. “Wait, is it okay to treat a national treasure so poorly?!”

“When I told the king ‘I want to study it,’ he said, ‘Don’t break it,’ and let me borrow it.”

“So easily?! Like you were asking to borrow a new pocket watch that he just bought?!”

“It sounds like the king wants to research overscience relics,” Genia shrugged. “You think something happened?”

“I-I wouldn’t know...”

Having learned there was a connection between his former world and this one after the incident in the Star Dragon Mountain Range, Souma directed his research organizations to do more specific research into the overscience relics that were no doubt key to learning what the connection was. He hadn’t gone so far as to explain that situation to them, though.

“Anyway, today I think we’ll run tests on the Hero’s Sack.” Genia picked up the relic. “Now first, let’s see about its weight and volume. As you can see, at present, even a delicate basement-dweller with thin arms like me can easily lift it up.”

“Was the self-deprecation necessary? But yes, it certainly does look light.”

“But, get this, there’s already a whole lot of stuff inside. Okay, my golems, bring it on out.”

With that, Genia had the dirt golems she made with her own ability bring over a large, rectangular water tank. It had to be as large as a sizable shed. The base was about four by five meters, and it was more than four meters tall. Genia had to put up a ladder just to stand on the edge of it.

Merula, who was left looking up at her, asked, “Um, Genia? What is this for?”

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“The thing about this sack is, it’s already been left immersed in a river for half a day.”

“What are you doing to a national treasure?! Won’t you be punished?!”

Merula was confused, but Genia didn’t care.

“We can’t let little things get in the way of academic progress.”

“I... I always thought I was too obsessed with research, but... it’s a big world out there.”

“Haha! Please, don’t compliment me like that, Merumeru.”

“I’m not complimenting you!”

“Well, anyway, thanks to being immersed in the river for half a day, there’s a lot of river water inside here. We don’t know its volume, so it remains unknown whether it’s full or not. Regardless, I think if we open the sack into this water tank, we can find out how much water is inside. If it gets dangerous, we can just close the sack up, after all.” With that, Genia turned the sack toward the water tank. “Now, the grand opening.”

With that easygoing proclamation, Genia opened the sack and water started gushing out with incredible force. The kickback made Genia lean backward despite herself, but she managed to prevent it from becoming a problem by having her golem servants hold her in place.

The water kept building, and in no time, the tank was already half full. Because it had been filled with river water, it was muddy, and there was a lot of algae, chunks of driftwood, and garbage inside.

“Oh, fish...” Merula, who was looking up from below, noticed a number of fish swimming inside the tank. They must have gotten inside while it was immersed in the river.

Setting aside everything else, the fish in the bag were still alive. This is fascinating. I don’t know what the bag is like inside, but at a bare minimum, it has the conditions necessary to support living fish.

Merula tended to get dragged around by Genia, but she was every bit as curious. She quickly shifted her mind into research mode and began analyzing.

The water, which it seemed might come out infinitely, eventually came to a stop with the tank nine-tenths of the way full.

“Hmm,” said Genia. “It’s unthinkable that this was all that came in after it was immersed in the river for half a day. Therefore, this might be right around the capacity of the sack. More or less than one shed full? Normally, if there was this much water inside, I wouldn’t be able to lift it. Does that mean

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the weight of the things inside can be ignored?”

Having come down from the ladder, Genia speculated with her hand on her chin.

“It’s incredible to be able to ignore the weight of so much water...” Merula pondered. “Oh! Look, Genia. Can you see the fish swimming in the tank?”

“Hm? ...You’re right. They’re swimming around full of energy.”

“Are they so energetic because it was just half a day? But there’s no light inside, right? Even if there was water the whole time, they’d probably think it was night and be more sluggish.”

“The fish inside are energetic, huh... There’s something about that fact that catches my attention. If I recall, the king said food that gets put inside doesn’t rot easily. If that’s the case...”

The girls traded arguments that seemed to go nowhere.

While they did, there were two men watching them from the terrace of the log cabin built inside the ruined dungeon workshop. One of them was the Captain of the Royal Guard, Ludwin Arcs, who was Genia’s fiancé. The other was Merula’s guardian (?), Souji Lester, the rotten bishop sent from the Orthodox Papal State of Lunaria.

The two were drinking beer on the terrace while watching the women engaged in their research. One wore a dumbfounded smile, and the other was holding his head.

“That Genia, being reckless again.” The one holding his head was Ludwin. Today, like every day, the serious Captain of the Royal Guard was being jerked around by his childhood friend Genia. “Did she say she left a national treasure in a river for half a day? What was she thinking?! If it got lost, they’d do more than just abolish the House of Maxwell!”

“Hahaha!” Souji laughed jollily as Ludwin clutched his head. “Oh, what’s the harm? Either way, during your generation, the Houses of Arcs and Maxwell will merge to become the House of Maxwell-Arcs, right?”

“Urgh, that’s not the problem! Besides, should you be letting Madam Merula run wild, Sir Souji? You’re her guardian, aren’t you?”

“Even if you call me her guardian, my job’s just to take it easy and avoid acting on the requests my country sends me,” Souji said. “I’ll protect her from the demands of my country to arrest her, but I don’t care enough to open my mouth about anything else. When it comes to anything other than research, she’s got her act together better than I do, anyway.”

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While saying that, Souji knocked back his beer. Normally, a man of the cloth in the Lunarian Orthodox faith would be expected to refrain from such worldly desires, but he was as rotten as ever.

"Phew..." he added. "When it comes to one of us telling the other off, it's Merula that's the noisy one, you know? It's always, 'Clean up this room,' or, 'You're acting like a slob. Get it together.'"

"No, I think Madam Merula is right... They're both researchers, but the way she's neat and tidy is like the polar opposite of Genia."

"You might be surprised to find you'd be better off getting together with Merula instead, don't you think?" Souji asked.

"By the same token, if we paired you up with Genia, I think the two of you would run even more wild than you do now."

Imagining the pairings of Ludwin and Merrula, and Souji and Genia... The two of them smiled wryly. That was because though it resulted in couples with similar personalities, they just didn't feel right.

"Well, it's hard for things to work out when both partners are too similar, after all," Souji said.

"...Is that how it works?"

While the two were having that sort of heart-to-heart talk, Genia waved Souji over. "Hey, you got a minute, Old Man Souji?"

"Hm? You mean me, Young Miss Genia?"

"Yeah. Sorry, but could you come over here for a moment?"

"Geez, I guess I'll have to..."

With steps made slightly unsteady by alcohol, Souji headed over to where Genia and Merula were.

Being called out by name when Genia was experimenting...

Ludwin had a bad feeling about this. But if he stopped the man from going, he was bound to be the one to eat a stray bullet instead, so he shut up and watched Souji go.

—Slightly before Genia called Souji over—

"I suspect the reason why food that's put in the sack doesn't rot easily is because the time it takes the food to rot is being extended," Genia said.

"By which you mean?" Merula asked.

"I think the flow of time inside the sack is different from the flow of time outside the sack. Perhaps the reason the fish that had been inside for half a day were still so energetic also stems from the flow of time being different.

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So, here's the idea."

Genia pulled out an hourglass. When turned upside down, the sand that was filling the top part began falling to the bottom. Genia put the hourglass into the sack in that state.

"This hourglass is designed so that it takes five minutes for all the sand to reach the bottom. We'll wait five minutes with it like this."

"...I see. So that's how it is."

—Five minutes later—

When Genia pulled out the hourglass, the sand still hadn't fully fallen. More than that, there was little change in the amount of sand at the top at all.

Genia brought her hand to her chin and groaned. "Hrm... I expected the sand not to have fully fallen, but if the amount in the top hasn't noticeably changed, does that mean time is practically stopped?"

"Time's stopped inside this bag?! Is that possible?!"

"Our common sense doesn't apply when it comes to the way overscience relics work, my dear Merumeru."

"Don't call me that... But how can we tell if time is stopped inside or not?"

"Hm... It seems we're forced to use our last resort."

"L-Last resort?"

Merula gulped as Genia flashed her an indomitable smile.

"Going inside to see."

And that was why Souji was called over.

Merula turned a cold look on Genia. "So *you're* not going to go inside."

"I am an observer," Genia said. "I have a duty to leave records of the experiment."

"Honestly... This is really going to be okay, right?"

"You're worried about the old man?" Genia smirked, and Merula turned to look away.

"Even if it was him, I'd have trouble sleeping at night if anything were to happen."

"It'll be fine," said Genia. "You saw how energetically the fish were swimming around, didn't you?"

"They may have looked that way on the surface, but there's no way to tell if the fish are really fine when they don't speak."

Then Souji came over. "You called, Young Miss Genia?"

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“Hee hee! I know this is sudden, but we’re going to have you help us out a little.”

“Help? ...Wait, whuh?!”

Without waiting for his response, Genia pulled the Hero’s Sack over the top of Souji.

Souji had an awfully muscular physique for a man of the cloth, and normally he never would have fit into a sack like that; but once it was over his head, he went in easily. He was completely inside in no time.

Merula was flabbergasted at what just suddenly happened. “Wait! Is this really okay?!”

“No worries, no worries... Probably.”

“What do you mean, probably...?”

“For now, let’s wait.”

Was it around ten minutes later?

Genia slowly took Souji’s body out of the bag.

When Souji flew out and landed flat on his butt, Merula rushed over to him.

“Souji! Are you okay?!”

“Ow, ow, ow... What? What in the world just happened?”

“There’s nothing wrong with you, right?! Do you have two arms and two legs?! Do you have two eyes, noses, and ears?!”

“No, it’d be weird if a human had two noses. Wait, but, huh?”

When Souji looked restlessly around the area, Genia asked him a question.

“Old Man Souji, just now, I put you in a bag. About how much time do you feel has passed?”

“Time? I wasn’t counting, but... you pulled it off me right afterward, right?”

“Nope. You were actually inside the bag for about twenty seconds.”

“Don’t be stupid. There’s no way it was that long.”

“Hm... Ow!”

As Genia was trying to think—*smack*—a fist dropped down on her head.

When Genia turned around, Ludwin was standing there with a smile on his face and a pulsing vein on his temple. In response to that threatening look, Genia managed to force a smile, her face twitching.

“B-Big Brother Luu? I-I can’t say I approve of domestic violence.”

“You be quiet! What do you think you’re doing, suddenly using Sir Souji

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for your experiments?!”

“It was for the advancement of science...”

“There are things it’s okay to do, and things that aren’t! Now, listen here, you...”

While Ludwin was starting to thoroughly lecture Genia, Merula was staring at the Hero’s Sack which had been left lying on the ground.

Souji noticed her line of sight and spoke up. “H-Hey... Merula?”

Even after he called her name, Merula’s eyes were still fixed on the sack.

Souji remembered. Merula Merlin was a bundle of curiosity, and she would keep charging forward even after it killed the cat. For instance, she crept into a holy place, the main church of Lunarian Orthodoxy, to steal a glance at the Lunalith, a monolith which relayed prophesies from the moon god Lunaria, who was the object of worship in Lunarian Orthodoxy, were said to descend. That was how she was declared a witch by the Orthodox Church and ended up on the run.

As if she resolved herself to do it, Merula shouted and thrust her head into the sack.

“Merula?!” Souji shouted.

Then Ludwin and Genia noticed the situation, too.

“Madam Merula?!”

“Merumeru!”

Unlike Ludwin, who was genuinely concerned for her well-being, Genia moved next to Merula, who was shoulders-deep in the bag, then pulled out a pocket watch and called out to her.

“Merumeru, can you hear my voice?”

“Yes. I hear you,” the reply came from inside the bag. It looked like she was okay.

“Merumeru, what’s it like in there? Did you see anything?”

“I saw something black just past the entrance. I don’t know how to say it, but it was like darkness. I ended up thrusting my head inside it, but now I can’t see a thing.”

“Darkness, huh... Can you hear my voice without any time lag?”

“Yes. I can hear you. In my current situation, it looks like the flow of time isn’t any different from outside.”

“Hm... I wonder how far you have to go in for the flow of time to change. Will you move forward?”

“I’ll try. Could I get you to hold onto my ankles, just in case?”

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“Gotcha. I’ll hold on tight.”

Genia gripped Merula by the ankles as she slowly crawled forward into the bag. Even when she was halfway in, Merula seemed to hear Genia properly, without any time lag.

“Merula, can I get you to sing something as you move forward from here on?” Genia called.

“Okay. ...La. La lu la.”

A clear, pretty singing voice came from inside the bag.

It was a melody no one here knew, but the song might have come from Merula’s homeland, the Spirit Kingdom of Garlan. While they could hear that singing, Merula’s body kept advancing into the bag. Then, when Merula’s feet and Genia’s hands were all the way inside the bag up to her wrists, it happened.

Merula’s singing stopped dead.

“Merula, can you hear me?” Genia called out to her, but there was no response.

However, Genia’s hands were definitely still gripping Merula’s ankles. From there, Genia got help from Ludwin and Souji to pull Merula out of the bag. When they did...

“La la la.”

The moment they started pulling, they heard Merula’s singing. She continued singing as if nothing had happened. When she was pulled out, Merula tilted her head to the side in confusion.

“The way it felt to me, not long after I started singing, you immediately pulled me out. I hadn’t even finished my first song yet.”

When she heard that report from Merula, Genia said, “Hm...” and thought deeply about it. “It would seem that when a ‘target’ is placed inside the bag, that target’s time is stopped when it is fully inside. That’s why, when Merula’s feet were sticking out, and when I had just my hands inside, we weren’t affected.”

Having said that, Genia clapped her hands.

“Well, for now, let’s summarize what we’ve learned in a report. Overscience relics are fascinating indeed. I think even just what we learned today will be enough to satisfy the king.”

“You’re right. It was a truly fascinating item.”

The women went about writing their report on the day, full of energy for some reason.

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Looking at the two of them, the men sighed.

“Hahh... It looks like it ended without anything going too wrong,” said Ludwin.

“Hey, Ludwin, do you get put through this all the time?” Souji asked, sounding concerned, and Ludwin responded with a dry smile.

“Yes... But now we’ll have some quiet for a little while...”

“Come to think of it, Merumeru,” Genia commented, “I’ve had a request from the king to investigate the Summoning Room, you know?”

“Oh, that room they used for the summoning ritual that brought His Majesty here from another world? That sounds very interesting indeed.”

“““...”””

It seemed a second episode of “Let’s Test It!” had been confirmed.

Seeing the dazed look in Ludwin’s eyes, Souji patted him on the shoulder.

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Epilogue 2: On To Yet Another Country

Having formed our contracts with Naden and Ruby in the Star Dragon Mountain Range, we returned to the kingdom.

Like I'd told Tomoe, the castle was still being swamped with marriage proposals, so I planned to continue my trip abroad. Though, we had some items like the Little Susumu Mark V and Little Musashibo which were bulky and ill-suited to our trip, so we came back to drop them off.

When Naden, the black ryuu, and Ruby, the red dragon, set down in Parnam Castle, the castle guards started panicking. Even if they already knew about Naden, they hardly could have anticipated that Ruby would be joining us, too...

Come to think of it, I had totally forgotten to report that.

Regardless, I dismounted from Naden and headed over to the gondola Ruby had been carrying. Naden carried the gondola on the way there, but she was going to be my queen. If she carried it and Hal's wife arrived empty-handed, it would have reflected poorly on Ruby, so we decided Ruby would carry it.

"Ruby," Naden said. "You carried it without any shaking, I hope?"

"Shove off, Naden. I carried it just fine."

Naden and Ruby started bickering the moment they changed back into human form.

There was supposed to be a hierarchical relationship between them now, as the wives of a king and one of his retainers, but it seemed like neither of them cared, and they were having a good time sniping at each other. This sort of relationship must have been easier for them.

Then the door to the gondola opened and Liscia came out. "Urgh..."

"Liscia?!" I exclaimed.

The moment she got onto the ground, Liscia stumbled, so I hurried to catch her. With Liscia in my arms, I looked at her to find she was looking

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pale, and covering her mouth.

"A-Are you okay?! What's wrong?!"

"Sorry... I'm a little unsteady on my feet... Is it motion sickness?"

Motion sickness from the gondola... Was that it? Seeing Liscia like that, Naden blamed Ruby.

"You said you didn't let it shake!" Naden yelled.

"I-I don't think it did, okay?!"

"Calm down, please," said Aisha, disembarking. "I don't think it shook that much."

Liscia laughed weakly, and added, "I don't think it's Ruby's fault," to cover for her. "I think the fatigue from the long trip finally got to me. I must have failed to manage my health properly."

"Are you really okay?" I asked.

"Yeah... But I'm going on ahead to rest in my room. Carla, would you come with me?"

"O-Okay. You can lean on me."

"Should I come with you, too?" I asked.

"You have to give Hakuya a report on what happened, don't you, Souma? You need to make living arrangements for Naden and Ruby, too. I'll be fine, so go do your job."

Urkh... When she said it like that, there was nothing I could say back to her.

In the end, all I could do was watch as Liscia left for her room, leaning on Carla's shoulder for support. If I acted too worried, she would probably get mad, so I decided to focus on what needed to get done for now.

"Now that we have everyone gathered together..."

By the time I returned to the governmental affairs office, discussed with Haakuya the events that had transpired, took care of the various procedures that had to be handled for Naden and Ruby, and sent out an order to the research institute regarding an investigation into overscience relics, the date had changed. Now that the work was all handled, I summoned the members of my traveling entourage once more.

In the room were the six who returned with us: Aisha, Naden, Carla, Halbert, Kaede, and Ruby; plus three more, Hakuya, Juna, and Roroa, who had been holding down the fort. Liscia still wasn't feeling well, so she was in her room resting.

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“Is it still a good idea for me to be away from the castle?” I asked with a glance to Hakuya.

He nodded in confirmation. “Yes... The number of marriage proposals coming to the castle still hasn’t dropped off.”

That figures. The situation in the Star Dragon Mountain Range went by so quickly that it took fewer days than I’d been expecting, after all. No, with all that happened, I should be happy it had been resolved so quickly.

“...Well, that being the case, I think I’ll go on a diplomatic mission to another country. Liscia’s health worries me, but she herself told me to go.”

I was actually thinking of staying in the castle until Liscia fully recovered, but she said, “I don’t want my poor health to stop you from taking this important opportunity to visit other countries.” She strongly stressed that “Contact with other cultures will help to fuel you. So I want you to go and see the world.”

If she was going to say it like that, I had no choice but to go.

“Tomoe is waiting at that village, so I want to set out tomorrow,” I said. “Now, as for our next destination... I think I’d like to go to the Republic of Turgis.”

The Republic of Turgis was a land of frigid cold in the southernmost reaches of the continent. It was an inaccessible country, covered in snow and ice during the winter, and the skies there were disrupted by warm air currents, making it so wyverns couldn’t fly. They had a national policy of northward expansionism, and they recently showed signs of making a move north during the war with the Principality of Amidonia, hadn’t they?

I looked to each of my companions and then said, “I don’t really understand the moves that country is making. It’s a country I don’t understand very well in general, so I’d like to see what things are like there for myself. Whether we’re going to have hostile or cordial relations with them in the future, I think knowing more about that country will let me make more appropriate decisions.”

The battle with the Principality of Amidonia happened because they had already firmed up their will to oppose us, so there was no room for me to investigate their domestic situation. It could also be said that that was why Roroa had gotten the drop on me in the end. In order to prevent that from happening next time, I wanted to thoroughly investigate things in advance.

“Th-The Republic of Turgis?” Naden asked.

“...That’s not exactly a place I care to go,” Ruby added.

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Both of them wore unpleasant looks on their faces.

I knew wyverns hated cold places, but it looked like that went for ryuus and dragons, too.

It was mid-May, and the Kingdom had already warmed up. Apparently in the Republic however, the temperature had only risen to around ten degrees Celsius. That climate would be harsh on Naden and Ruby.

“It’s a cold land, after all. I don’t think I’ll be of much use as a bodyguard, either,” said Carla, who, as dragonewt, also had trouble dealing with the cold.

If she wore thick clothes, she could come, but she apparently wanted to say that if that slowed her down, that made bringing her as a bodyguard pointless.

Not being able to bring those three would be a huge cut to our overall firepower, but they couldn’t help it if their races made them ill-suited to the task at hand. If they forced themselves to do things they couldn’t reasonably be expected to, and they ruined their health as a result, it would trouble me. I’d have to give up on them this time.

“Naden, Ruby, Carla: please stay in the kingdom,” I said. “I’ll have Liscia rest and recover this time, too. Aisha, Hal, and Kaede, I’d like the three of you to continue on as my bodyguards. We’ll bring Tomoe and Inugami, too.”

“Leave it to me.” Aisha pounded a fist against her chest.

““Y-Yes, sir.”” Hal and Kaede saluted.

“Also... Roroa.”

“Hm? Me?” Roroa had a blank look on her face.

“I’d like you to come along, too. I want you to look into goods we could trade with the republic. You own a company, so I’m sure you’re familiar with trade goods.”

Roroa’s face burst into a beaming smile. “Oh! You don’t mind me comin’ with you? Yippee! Mweheheh, just you leave it to me, darlin’. I’ll find ya some nice trade goods.” She wrapped herself around my arm.

While patting her on the head, I turned to Juna next. “If I’m bringing Roroa, that leaves me less than confident in the amount of firepower we have on hand. So, Juna...”

“Yes?”

“Juna, I’d like you to come, too. Can you work that into your schedule?”

As the Prima Lorelei, Juna was the face of the Jewel Voice Broadcast.

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She was the host of the educational program, and she needed to appear on the singing program, too. That was why there were no openings in her schedule, and the question was really, *Is it possible for you to adjust your schedule?*

Juna gave me a broad smile. “Hee hee. It’s fine. Or more like I’ll make it so it’s fine,” she said definitively, bringing a hand to her chest and bowing. “If I have Komari and Siena cover for me on the educational program, it should be no trouble. The younger loreleis are growing up, and I think they should be fine without me for a little while.”

“They will? That helps.”

“No, just like Roroa, I want to travel with you, sire.” Juna gave me a teasing wink. Yeah, she was very charming.

For now, the members of the group were chosen.

“Hakuya, could I get you to try putting in a request for talks with the Republic of Turgis?” I asked. “I basically intend to go incognito, but I may need to request a meeting on the spot. Set things up for me, would you?”

“Understood.” Hakuya bowed and accepted the task.

Okay, that was everything more or less ready.

“Well then, everyone,” I said. “shall we be on our way?”

And so we left for the frozen country of the south: the Republic of Turgis.

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How a Realist Hero Rebuilt the Kingdom: Volume 6
by Dojyomaru

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